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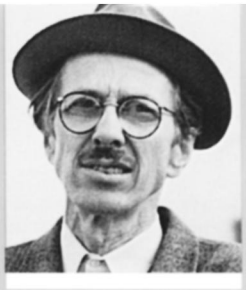

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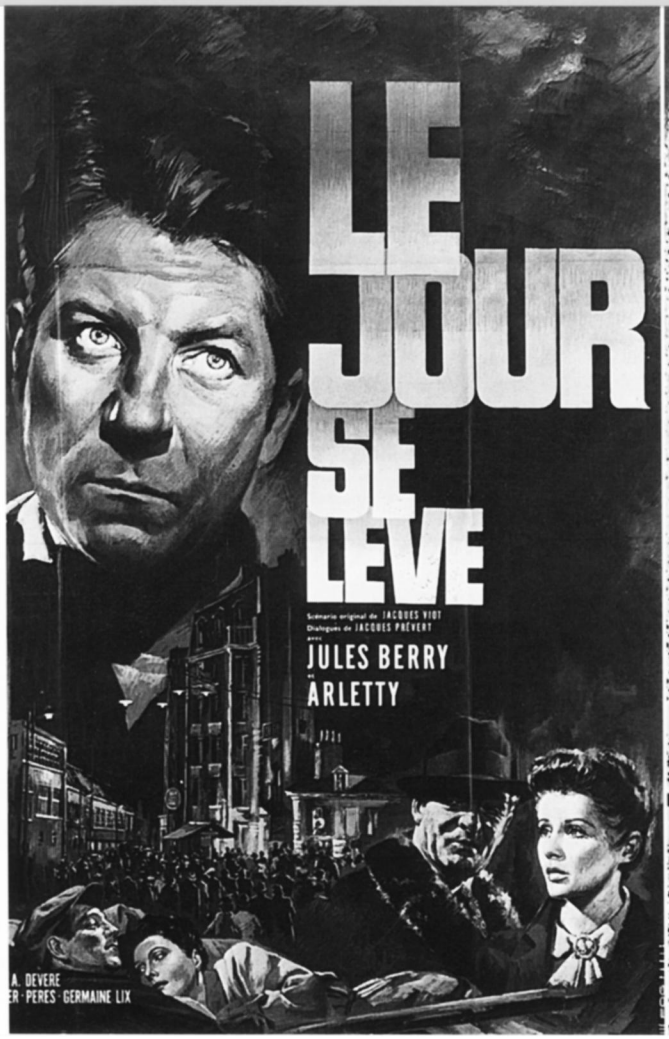

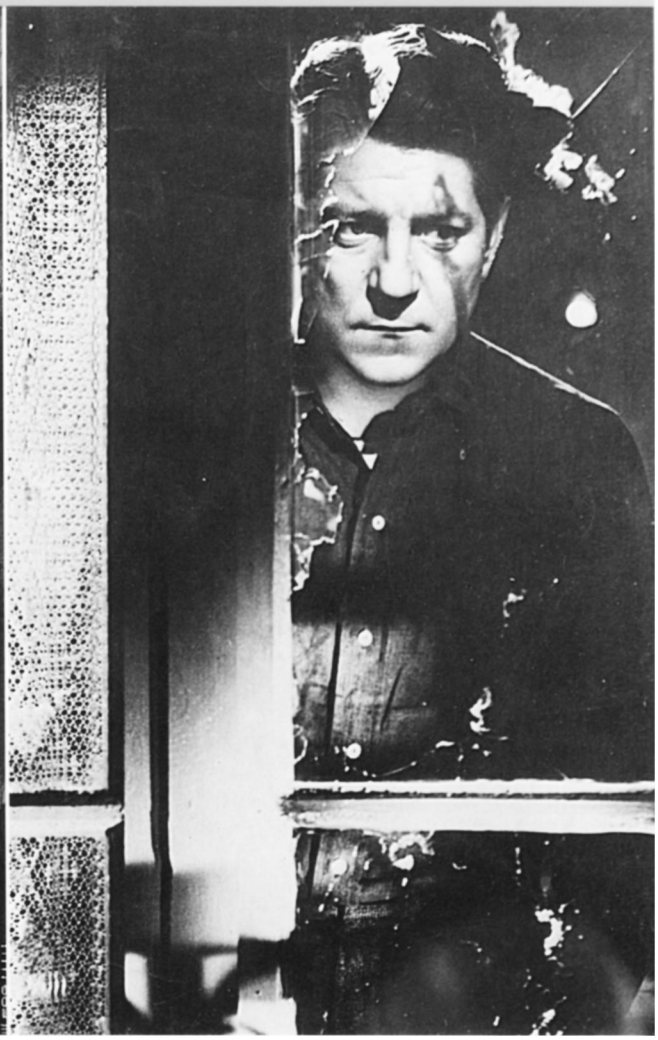

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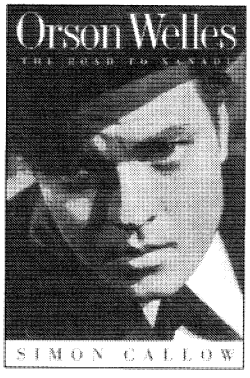
Wars, trans. Eleanor Hochman (New York: Ungar, 1972). This book, published in France in the 1950s, helped to transmit Sartre's ideas about the novel into French film theory.

34. For a listing of allusions to films noirs in *Breathless*, and for a useful survey of the French intellectual background, see Dudley Andrew, "*Breathless*: Old As New," in *Breathless*, ed. Dudley Andrew (Rutgers, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1987), pp. 3–20.
35. Quoted by Leighton Grist, "Moving Targets and Black Widows: Film Noir in Modern Hollywood," in *The Book of Film Noir*, ed. Ian Cameron (New York: Continuum, 1993), p. 267.
36. For an interesting commentary on this phenomenon, see Jonathan Rosenbaum, "Allusion Profusion," *Chicago Reader* (October 21, 1994), pp. 12, 25–26. I am grateful to Rosenbaum for his helpful suggestions on my own essay.
37. Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism: Or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1991). See also Marcia Landy and Lucy Fischer, "*Dead Again* or A-Live Again: Postmodern or Postmortem?," *Cinema Journal*, vol. 33, no. 4 (Summer 1994), pp. 3–22.



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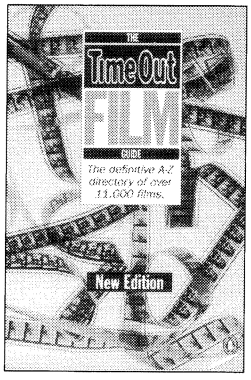

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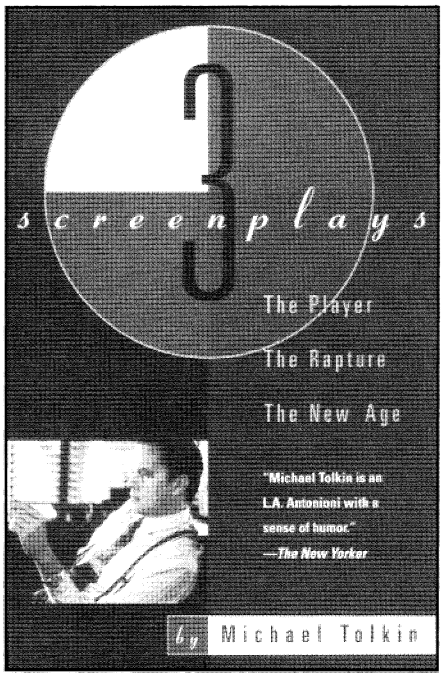

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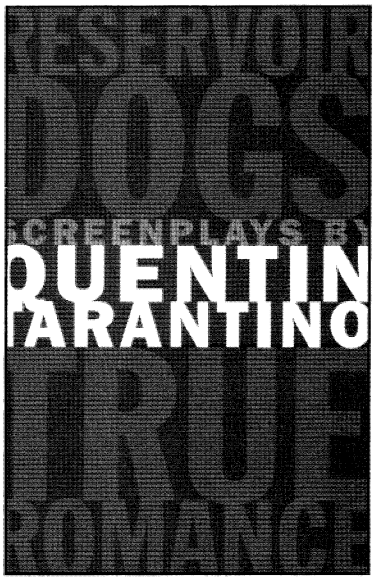

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Today's Smartest Screenplays

Tania Modleski

Our Heroes Have Sometimes Been Cowgirls

When a woman film-maker stakes a claim to genres like the Western does she betray feminism by adopting male stories and male myths? When a woman makes a Western about a cross-dressing female hero, should we read it as an allegory of the female director in Hollywood? Does female success in the world of popular entertainment mean that a woman's gotta do what a man's gotta do?

In the early years of feminist film theory, writers such as Claire Johnston urged feminist film-makers not to abandon the formulas of the entertainment film which have given so much pleasure to women, but rather to work at transforming them. Many feminist critics began to study women's genres like Hollywood maternal melodramas and television soap operas in order to examine how women's fantasies have been shaped and how feminists might begin to reshape them. Although the fantasies of many women have surely been influenced by male genres too, we didn't really think much back then about how women might appropriate these genres. At the time, such an appropriation might have struck many of us as an affirmation of the very values and storytelling traditions we wanted to subvert.

In those days female "transvestism"—a term we used figuratively to designate an identification with the opposite sex—was often held to be a sorry condition; in fact it became a major metaphor for the tragic plight of the female spectator, who because she was forced to project herself onto a male hero was thought to be unable to "achieve a stable sexual identity," as Laura Mulvey put it in her analysis of *Duel in the Sun*. Recently, however, transvestism has taken on a more positive meaning, and the idea that one should strive to achieve "a stable sexual identity" has increasingly come to be seen as retrograde and severely limiting. Marking this shift in attitude is Maggie Greenwald's 1993 Western, *The Ballad of Little Jo*, a landmark in the history of women's cinema and a major artistic achievement by almost any standard. Partly about the pleasure and freedom enjoyed by a woman who cross-dresses as a man, the film invites us to rethink the position of woman in and at the movies, as well as that of the woman behind the camera.

Greenwald is among the most talented of a new breed of women directors emerging today who refuse to remain confined to their traditional spheres in the realm of fantasy, but range freely across both male and female territory, transforming the land they roam.

The Ballad of Little Jo—the first Western written and directed by a woman since the silent era—stars Suzy Amis, who gives a stunningly subtle performance as a young Eastern society woman cast out by her family when she has a child out of wedlock. Ini-

Suzy Amis as Josephine Monaghan (right); and as Little Jo (below) in *The Ballad of Little Jo*

An Interview with Maggie Greenwald

tially frail and vulnerable, Josephine Monaghan comes out West, adopts male dress, and becomes Little Jo Monaghan, a self-sufficient sheep farmer who successfully fights off the brutal Western Cattle Company when it attempts to force the sheep farmers off their land.

The film retains what feminist critic Annette Kolodny has seen as the hallmark of female fantasies of the landscape: a sense of intimacy with the land and its creatures. At the same time, with its breathtaking cinematography, it assumes the traditionally masculine prerogative of glorying in the sublimity and solitude of the West. *Ballad* is not Greenwald's first incursion into male worlds. *The Kill-Off* (1989), Greenwald's second film (after *Home Remedy* in 1987, which the director describes as "a black-comedy about an anti-yuppie's crisis in a yuppie world"), is to my mind the most successful and interesting adaptation of the work of the noir novelist Jim Thompson. Greenwald is relentless in exploring the seediness of Thompson's settings and his characters' moral and psychological degradation. Yet "transvestism" in the case of the Greenwald-Thompson interaction works both ways: in adapting the book, Greenwald faithfully

adhered to the male writer's vision, but at the same time, as she relates in the following interview, she actually detected and elicited a "feminine" current in the work of a writer whom many would consider the ultimate hard-boiled novelist. Unfortunately, *The Kill-Off* remains unavailable here, having barely opened in this country; in contrast, when it was released abroad in 1990, it created a great stir—at Cannes as well as other festivals (including the Torino Film Festival, where it won the Best Director Award).

The Ballad of Little Jo was highly praised in a variety of quarters, but it encountered some critical resistance as well. Because such resistance can tell us much about the stakes of feminist film-making, especially the kind which seems to encroach on male genres, I asked that we begin by trying to analyze this resistance.

MAGGIE GREENWALD: Because there are so few, everybody wants films like *Ballad* to represent themselves, to say whatever it is they want to say. Someone like the lesbian critic Ruby Rich, who criticized the film for not being about lesbian desire, wants a different movie—one which *should* be made. I felt that she misunderstood that this wasn't a film about sexuality but about gender.

Rich's desire to have a film about lesbianism is understandable, but it's more dubious when a similar criticism comes from the mainstream press.

TANIA MODLESKI: *There was a review in the* Los Angeles Times*—by Peter Rainer. . . .*

Some of these white men criticized this women's film, this feminist film, for not dealing more with the gay issue, in effect siding with gays against me as a woman (even though the gay press has been on the whole very positive about the film). "See, we didn't like her Western for our reasons. But we didn't like it for your sake too. She didn't represent gay people fairly. We of the mainstream press side with you marginalized folk. Let's join together against her."

Some of the reviews were fantastic and wonderful, but some accused me of negative portrayals of the men, saying that the male characters were generic, and also that the film should have some gay content. There was in the script a whole subplot involving one of the female characters coming on to Jo. Unfortunately it had to go because it disrupted the flow of the piece as a whole. What's left are subtle moments in which the woman flirts with Jo. We realize that what she, Jo, has triggered in this character is another dimension of the existence she has chosen.

What would you say to those critics of the mainstream press who criticized the "negative," "generic" portrayals of men?

One of the things I found very unfortunate in these attacks, which made me see how defensive and sexist many of these reviewers are, is that not one of the reviewers, not one, took their thinking a step further to say, "Gee, this is what it's like for a woman to go to the movies for her whole life and watch herself portrayed through the eyes of men." To me that was a profound disappointment. Instead, for example, one reviewer said, "The film made me want to go home and watch 'Bonanza.'" I feel the press is obligated—particularly at a time when point of view *is* such a controversial issue—to take that thinking to the next step. But by siding with minorities, the white male-dominated press sidestep this obligation and go on the offensive, saying, for instance, that Allison Anders shouldn't have made *Mi Vida Loca* [a film about Latinas in gangs in Los Angeles]. It's a divide-and-conquer tactic. Trying to turn Latina women against white women. If someone gave some money to a Latina film-maker we would have an opportunity to see her point of view. Allison's the first film-maker who could get financing who was even interested in Latina gang girls. It's infuriating—I could go on and on.

The criticism about negative portrayals of men in Ballad *doesn't seem to me even to be accurate.*

I think there was more complexity and depth to the male characters than in the average portrayal of women, even in films that are supposed to be about a woman. For that matter, the male characters are more fully drawn than most male characters in mainstream films by and about men. That was something I wanted to explore, to show how men and women relate to one another, how, for example, someone who is very decent and very kind is also capable of being very brutal and very cruel.

This is getting us into the film proper. But before we go into too much detail, I wonder if we could back up and discuss your own history of coming to film-making.

I always wanted to make a film, but when I was young and watching movies, I thought the actors were the ones who made the story. So I became an actor, and while I never particularly liked it, circumstances of my life made me stay with it. I also became a dancer

for a while. When I was about 20 I realized that what I was really interested in was directing. I was living in L.A. at the time, and so I quit what I was doing and went into the film business. After a year in film school I got a job as a driver, with the intention of working my way up. I started writing and making short films and decided that I wanted to learn to edit—I felt that that was the most important thing I could learn to do to teach me about directing. I moved into postproduction, working as a picture editor for a few years, and then I shifted out of that into sound editing, because it was a lucrative gig and a way that I could work only part time and develop my own work.

Andrew Lee Barrett as Bobby and Loretta Gross as Luane in *The Kill-Off*

It took me five years to get money to make my first film, which actually came through in New York. A friend introduced me to a businessman who thought it would be interesting to finance a film, and he offered me $200,000; so I wrote a script that was doable for that amount of money. That became my first film, *Home Remedy*. It did the festival circuit for about a year, and opened at Film Forum in New York in 1987. The film was picked up by Films Around the World to represent it abroad. They financed my next film.

I then developed a passion for the work of Jim Thompson and knew I wanted to make a film out of one of his novels. I eventually did adapt *The Kill-Off*.

What in particular attracted you to his work? I'm intrigued that you've worked in two genres that are considered very male—the Western and film noir.

For one thing, I love his language. His work was the first work I was aware of reading that explored really dark characters—killers and thieves and prostitutes, and all manner of "lowlife"—from an internal perspective. So that as you're reading stories about people who are doing incredibly vicious things, you are inside of them and experiencing the world from their point of view of being vulnerable and fragile. And I considered that perspective to be very feminine. Everybody said these books were not cinematic because they were so psychological and internal; they're not filled with action. That became a huge issue for me in interviews after I made *The Kill-Off*, because I was grilled about moving into male terrain, and to me those qualities in fact made the work feminine.

So do you feel you brought out something "feminine" in the work that was already there—rather than adapting the work to your perspective as a woman?

Well, first let me say that *The Kill-Off* was not my first adaptation of a Thompson novel. I wrote a script based on *Savage Night*, and actually I was very faithful to the book. *Savage Night* is the story of a killer who's a little person who feels ineffectual in the world, who thinks he's powerless, and yet he's a vicious killer. And he's in love with two women: one is a gorgeous bombshell, but his real soulmate is a crippled, seemingly meek, really smart girl who turns out to be a killer too. I chose to adapt *The Kill-Off* because it was cheaper to produce than *Savage Night*

and it's the only Thompson novel that has a woman as the main character. The woman, Luane, is a bedridden old lady who uses the typical little old lady activity of gossiping on the phone to wield incredible power. The other women characters are very marginal, and where my influence came in was in pulling them into the forefront. As a woman I was reading between the lines, interested in finding out what the women characters were about, whereas Thompson was very clearly only seeing them through the men's eyes—which is fine, but that is not my point of view.

I wonder if you would talk about the striptease scene—the one where the woman, Danny, who is destined to replace Luane and who plots with Luane's husband to kill her, strips in the bar, while Luane dresses up at home and dances to the same music on the sound track. Would a feminist critic be right in saying that the stripper is positioned as the object of the male gaze?

I think that one of the fine lines and challenges to me as a woman making film is that I need to be able, in telling a story about a woman who is a stripper, to show what that life is about, and I would be a liar if I did not do that. But the difference between the way I would do it and the way a male film-maker might do it is that I am committed to not making it exploitative. In *The Kill-Off* I also felt it was important to use a real woman's body. Cathy Haase, the woman who played Danny, the prostitute and stripper, has an incredible, great-looking body, a luscious round woman's body. It's not a trendy hard body. In a town like that you're not going to find someone who goes to the gym five times a week.

The striptease scene represents an emotional peak in the film. You have Danny doing the striptease, and Luane, who is losing her husband, is at home in bed. To me, Luane is a woman terrified of life. Her evil grows out of tremendous fear. When she's alone she has the potential to be a free woman who can dance around and enjoy her sensuality, but for whatever reason she can't do that for most of her life. Then, too, there's the question, Is it real or is she imagining it? At the same time there's Myra [daughter of the bar's owner who committed incest with her] in that scene who's serving the men in the bar and they are starting to grope her, and we see her reaction to the stripper. I think we get a glimpse of what it means for a girl to grow up around that.

Jorjan Fox as Myra

In many noirs it would be not that scene but the killing itself that constitutes the climax of the film.

The Kill-Off is not a whodunit, but a who-will-do-it. We know from the beginning that Luane's going to get killed and the question is who will do it. To me the film is about three relationships, with the male characters and female characters equally balanced and equally written. Luane is at the center, the spider at the center of the web. It's a very dark film, and while probably today, given the interest in violent and nihil-

istic films, it would be picked up in a second here (although it's not about bloody violence but incredible emotional violence), at the time it was considered a tough sell.

How were you able to go on and get funding for Ballad*?*

Well, because *The Kill-Off* is so renowned among the independent film community's distributors and executives, Ira Deutchman, head of Fine Line Features, was interested in what I was doing. I went in and told him about two things I was working on. He raised an eyebrow when I gave him a one-line pitch about *Ballad*, and I thought, Well, he's really interested in that one, so I went home and wrote a rough draft in three weeks. Fred Berner, one of the producers, got involved at that time, and we took the project to Ira, who committed half the financing. It took a year and a half to raise the rest of the money. The other great hero of the financing story is Aline Perry, who greenlighted the film through Polygram Filmed Entertainment. Right now, perhaps, the idea of a cross-dressing Western sounds very trendy, but almost four years ago there was no *Crying Game* or *Orlando*. And *Unforgiven* didn't open until a year and a half after I'd written *Ballad*. So there was nothing to suggest that this would be a commercially viable project.

Why a Western?

From a very young age, I felt what I consider a very primal connection to the landscape of the West; to the idea of surviving against nature, in nature; to images of someone riding across a plain on a horse. I refuse to accept that these are male images; I think they are human images. In films that were more buddy kind of movies, the idea of friendship and fighting for a good cause with friends appealed to me. The Western is just a majestic, fabulous genre. And the few stories that have women as main characters were not so interesting to me.

Such as . . . ?

The woman in *High Noon*—not very interesting, though I might be more interested now than when I was a kid in telling her story. Barbara Stanwyck as a land baron—not interesting. Or Doris Day in *Calamity Jane*.

I don't know if you've seen that film recently. It's a lot more interesting than you may remember. It's about cross-dressing too, and there's also a strong current of female homoeroticism that we might be more inclined to see today than people were in the 50s. What about Johnny Guitar?

I didn't see it until I was an adult. It's very outrageous and I love it as a film, but I didn't connect in the way I've described.

Enjoying Johnny Guitar *depends to some extent on believing that it is outrageous for women to inhabit the West and the Western genre (other than in very restricted roles). Whereas what you're saying is . . .*

. . . that we belong.

So are you simply putting women into a genre without changing the conventions or are you critiquing the genre by, as it were, changing the subject?

I think that critiquing comes by the way. It was not an intention, but the very act of making a film like *Ballad* is so subversive that it becomes a critique. I wanted to make a Western and I knew I wanted to make a Western that had a woman as the main character. When I stumbled upon information about the real Little Jo I saw that her story was a classic Western story about a rugged individualist who carves out a place for *her*self in the American West. American history is full of women who did exactly that. Women came from all over the world to make lives for themselves, the same as men did. But the story does change when a woman is put at the center. And I would be a liar if I said there was not a tremendous amount of me in it. As a film-maker I'm working on male terrain and my subject matter is also "male terrain."

You're cross-dressing too, in a way.

Right. Just as Little Jo learned about being a woman through cross-dressing, the process of making the film involved my accepting myself as a woman, saying, Yes, I can be a director and be a woman and don't have to accept anymore what has been shoved down women's throats in the last 20 years or so—that in order to succeed you have to be like a man.

Exactly what is known about the real Josephine Monaghan?

Very little. The only thing that's known is what was published in the newspaper article when she died, which gave me the information for the beginning and the end of the story. She was a society girl who had a child out of wedlock. It's believed her sister cared for the child, or someone else may have adopted him. Her family threw her out, and somewhere between the time she left the Northeast and arrived in the West she assumed the identity of a man and lived her whole life

that way. She worked as a ranch hand, and I believe she sent money to her sister for the rest of her life to support her child. Her existence was pretty meager and lonely; she—he—was considered a very strange little fellow. She spent a period as a bronco buster, and was very successful at it, but she quit, maybe because she was attracting too much attention. She did eventually own her own homestead, but was never self-sufficient; she always had to work for others to get by.

She was tiny, five feet tall, and very feminine looking. Long after I wrote *Ballad*, someone sent me a copy of Julie Wheelwright's book, *Amazons and Military Maids,* about women who have cross-dressed in the military throughout history. The book is loaded with photographs and portraits of women who today we wouldn't believe for two seconds were men. But we're so used to women wearing jeans and suits and such that we don't realize the extent to which your outer appearance dictated what you were accepted as being. So while I have no doubt that people were a little suspicious of Jo and considered her somewhat peculiar, there's no record of anyone digging deeper.

In the film that suspicion is there throughout, just under the surface and sometimes reflected in the way people look at Jo or speak to her.

It was quite a scandal in the territory when it was discovered that Jo was a woman.

You have been talking a lot about the actual West, so I assume you did research on it.

Most of the research I did was through photographs. I wrote the script surrounded by photographs. The reality was far more fascinating than anything you could make up. For instance, looking at the photographs it occurred to me to ask, What happens when you suddenly decide to build a town in the middle of a forest? You end up with tree stumps in the middle of the road and mud all over the place. The buildings are shelters in these photographs—well, what are they made of? And you suddenly notice that something's got a piece of Paisley and that part of a roof or a window may be someone's scarf. It was a matter of using anything that was available to work with. I felt it was important to give the film that kind of texture. More than anything I wanted the land to be a character in the film, it's so vast and so imposing. For the people who went out there, the land was their main obstacle as well as the source of the life they built there. Jo's relation to the land is as central to what goes on in the story as her relationship with Tinman or Frank Badger.

It's interesting that you didn't use Cinemascope.

Yes, we talked about it, but we wanted an intimate story. The hugeness of the landscape comes through anyway, and we thought that with Cinemascope the images would be out of proportion with the story, it would destroy the intimacy.

Annette Kolodny wrote a book called The Lay of the Land, *which is about male fantasies and the desire to conquer the "virgin" territory, and so on. How does Jo's relation compare?*

Speaking for myself, when I got out there I looked at the land and couldn't begin to figure out how you would conquer it. When I sent her out to spend the winter alone with the sheep, I showed that Jo learns to use the land to survive; she learns to co-exist with it. I think she would have been destroyed if she tried to conquer it.

In another book, The Land Before Her, *Kolodny talks of women's fantasies and argues that they were very different from men's (though the period of which she is writing is earlier than the period of* Ballad*). The women want to come and create little gardens and have clinging vines around their cottages. . . .*

For an Eastern woman to come out West and make a garden might be the same mentality as the male fantasies, which are about the need to impose oneself on the land. To bring roses in and to force them to grow where they don't normally grow is like bringing the railroad in, isn't it?

Could we switch gears and talk a bit about the narrative, the part that was your construction, and some of the issues it gives rise to? You said that this was not a film about sexuality but about gender. Do you mean that it's not about homosexuality?

It's a question of asking how someone's perception of both the outside world and of herself changes when she stops wearing a skirt and puts on a pair of pants. When I first started writing the film I thought I was writing a film about a woman who becomes a man, but I realized very early on that I was writing a story of a woman who gets to become a true woman. By throwing off the trappings of socialized femininity which is connected to victimization, Jo is forced to find out who she really is. The first thing she does is learn how to survive and how to work, and she takes a job tending sheep out all by herself with no human company for months on end. She finds out what she likes, and they're all solitary things.

Which is amazing. What other films have dealt with the pleasures of solitude for a woman?

I feel it's my human right to know how to take care of myself and survive. That's something that traditional socialization denies women. We're caretakers of others, but we're supposed to be taken care of. That same socialization also denies women their sexuality because it punishes them for it; women have throughout time been denied the right to sex outside of marriage. So after learning how to take care of herself, the next important thing for Jo was to reclaim her sexuality. And I think that's what you mean when you say the film is about sexuality. In creating the story of Jo I searched the landscape for a mate for her. I came across the Chinese railroad worker, whose health has been destroyed by years of labor and who becomes Jo's "houseboy" after she saves him from lynching.

Little Jo and Percy
(Ian McKellen)

I was interested in your choice of a Chinese man to play the leading man; of all the ethnic men inhabiting the West—Native Americans, Mexicans, even African Americans—the Chinese man has been the most marginalized and in fact has usually been invisible.

Native American men are depicted as more "masculine" because it's a so-called "primitive" culture. To cast a Native American in the role wouldn't have pushed the gender issues in the same direction. In our history and our popular culture, the same thing has been done to Asian men that's been done to women. In Westerns, they're extras, they're in the background, or they're in the kitchen. They're asexual, and they're slaves who work their whole lives taking care of white men. I felt the two would connect with each other through a similar experience of life. And by the time they connect in the story it's not like she's the man and he's the woman; he is absolutely the man and she is absolutely the woman. They just happen to do jobs that are not conventional jobs.

You completely avoided sentimentality in your treatment of the relationship between Jo and Tinman, which is especially impressive considering the tendency is always—and certainly in the Western—to portray Western culture's "others" as subhuman or to idealize them. Ruby Rich called your depiction of this relationship subversive, though she spoke of it as stereotypical as well. A Village Voice *reviewer also thought she detected a "drift toward stereotype" in your delineation of this character.*

But I've used stereotypes throughout the whole film. The film is about stereotypes. I set out to make a conventional Western and to dig below the surface to find out what's underneath the conventions. All of the characters start out as types: the Frank Badger character, for instance. Percy . . .

Yes, we should talk about Percy because he has been a somewhat controversial character too.

Because Ian McKellen played him, Percy becomes more unusual than he would have if someone who is not an out gay actor had played him.

How so?

Because conventional Westerns are full of these marginalized men who are alone . . . and you don't know who they are and they never really connect, and they are someone's sidekick, or they're someone who is scary and bad and does one good deed. Who are they? And it's not just Westerns, but stories about seamen or pirates, anybody who has run away.

But the objection might be that the suggestion of repressed homosexuality in a character who violently attacks a prostitute links homosexuality to misogyny.

I don't get the connection. It's certainly not my thinking. We explored this character's lack of awareness about himself. Is he gay? Is he straight? It's possible that he is homosexual and that his repressed homosexuality does connect to his hatred of women; his sexual experiences with women could have been full of rage or shame. But if I had cast someone else—a straight actor or an actor who the world thinks is straight—the same inference might not have been made. Women are beaten up and brutalized all the time. But I'll take the accusation and accept that one is free to make it because Ian was cast in the role. I'll take it even further: Ian and I did talk about whether this character is a gay character who has fallen in love with a boy, or is a straight man who is attracted to Jo because she is a woman. And what I found really fascinating was the ambiguity. Who knows? I could say he's a straight character who thought it would be safe to have a boy around and is in fact attracted to Jo because Jo is really a woman. I like that complexity.

Little Jo with Tinman (David Chung)

I was very interested in the moment in the film in which Jo decides to allow her son to believe she is dead and rather than going back East to be with him, she chooses to remain in the West.

I put myself inside the morality of Jo's day. As adulterer and as bastard, both mother and child were outcasts. I always knew Jo couldn't go back, though there would come a time when she might want to, might come to a crisis and have the urge to flee back to the familiar. While it might be satisfying to a contemporary audience to have her go back and claim the child and say, "I am a woman, I will defy you all," it wouldn't have been believable for the time. And given the morality of the time, such an act wouldn't be doing anything for the child. By giving him up, though, she gave him legitimacy and removed the social stigma of his birth. But I do construct it as a choice. The moment of decision has to come.

Tell me about casting Suzy Amis as Jo.

I saw hundreds of women, both famous and unknown, in casting the part. I wanted to cast someone who was not well known. I thought it would be more difficult for the viewer if someone well known was in the part. Even if our budget had permitted us to have a Jodie Foster, for instance, Jodie's so famous you couldn't forget who she was for five minutes.

She did Maverick *instead!*

The experience of the movie involves completely forgetting whether you're watching a man or a

woman. Especially for the men who liked the film, this was an important aspect of it. So it was crucial to find someone who had great range as an actress, someone who was "feminine" enough to be believable in the role of the Eastern debutante and at the same time was capable of taking on the physical challenges of the rest of the film. And Suzy was the only one. Because she was away during much of the time we were casting, we didn't see her until we were three months into the process. A lot of the women who came to read for me dressed up in cowgirl outfits for the reading. But when I walked out in the hall the day Suzy was there, she was wearing skin-tight black pedalpushers and a low-cut black shirt, and she had black mules on and a pink bow in her hair, and her hair was down to her waist. Well, no one had come to read for Jo dressed like that. When she read, her reading was beautiful and natural, and all of the girly stuff fell away; I saw this wonderful androgynous quality begin to emerge.

The reviews of her performance were extremely favorable. In fact, though we began by focusing on the negative reviews your film received, many praised it lavishly. You must have been pleased by those.

Yes, very. And for the sake of this discussion I fear we haven't acknowledged these reviewers (mostly white men and some women) properly. Which I do here, now. Yes! But remarks like "made me want to go home and watch 'Bonanza'" prevented the important discussion from happening. I thought when I read that, You want to go back to . . .

. . . Hop Sing?

Yes . . . to the Western where there's no women around telling these three guys that they're not okay and where the Chinese man has no dick? That's where you want to go back to? Well, you can't. It's over.

Well, but is it really over? After all, many mainstream reviewers don't appear ready to get beyond their defensiveness, and they are the ones who control the information that gets out about films. For instance, they helped Clint Eastwood make pots of money on Unforgiven *by praising its originality and revisionary impulse. How will you and others who are making radically revisionary work which expresses different points of view keep going?*

A lot of people are still seeing my work. The video of the film is doing extremely well, and I get almost as many calls now as I did a year ago. If the work gets made, it gradually creates a market for itself. Anything that's this new has no market for itself yet. Of course, there's a market for Quentin Tarantino; it's the 90s reworking of very traditional and conventional popular culture, told from the point of view of the usual subjects—white men. I'm actually very optimistic; it's a matter of making the work and getting it out there, and little by little it will build a following. In the marketplace there is already the knowledge that women between 14 and 40 constitute a huge untapped market. Two years ago, no one acknowledged that.

By the way, since it's come up, what do *you think of* Unforgiven*?*

I'm actually an Eastwood fan, but I don't like *Unforgiven*. I'm confused by people who consider it revisionist. To me it's the same old stuff. I like much of Clint's work a lot, though. I like the fact that he's a man explicitly making work out of his experience as a man and has been doing so since his first, fabulous film, *Play Misty for Me*. His characters are never idealized, they're very human. His women characters are always strong and interesting; he's consistently done positive things with them. I mean, the portrayals are not full, because he's not that interested. People may think I mind, but I don't. I'm just saying that a man making such films should acknowledge, as Clint does, that it's his point of view of the world, not the way the world is. It's his experience of life and the world and *his* fantasies. His myths. But they're not mine. And I get to have mine. I want to have mine.

And what are you working on now?

I'm adapting the classic Yiddish play *The Dybbuk,* which takes place in a shtetl in the 1870s and is full of Jewish mysticism, folklore, and magical images from the Cabala. It's about star-crossed lovers: the boy dies, and the girl becomes possessed by his wandering spirit.

Another variation on the theme of cross-dressing!

In the play the girl is very much a spiritual cypher. I've approached the adaptation from her point of view. I'm very interested in creating the kinds of female heroes that would have meaning in our culture. Little girls need heroes too.

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Photos for Ballad *courtesy of Bill Foley.*

James Naremore

American Film Noir

The History of an Idea

Only that which has no history is definable.
—FRIEDRICH NIETZSCHE

The past is not dead. It isn't even past.
—WILLIAM FAULKNER

It has always been easier to recognize a film noir than to define the term. One can easily imagine a large video store where examples of such films would be shelved somewhere between Gothic horror and dystopian science fiction: in the center would be *Double Indemnity*, and at either margin *Cat People* and *Invasion of the Body Snatchers*. But this arrangement would leave out important titles. There is in fact no completely satisfactory way to organize the category, and nobody is sure whether the films in question constitute a period, a genre, a cycle, a style, or simply a "phenomenon."[1]

Whatever noir "is," the standard histories say it originated in America, emerging out of a synthesis of hard-boiled fiction and German Expressionism. The term is also associated with certain visual and narrative traits, which some commentators have tried to localize in the period between 1941 and 1958. Others contend that noir began much earlier and never went away.[2] One of the most comprehensive (but far from complete) references, Alain Silver and Elizabeth Ward's *Film Noir: An Encyclopedia of the American Style*, begins in 1927 and ends in the present, listing over 500 motion pictures of various stylistic and generic descriptions.[3]

Encylopedic surveys of the Silver and Ward type can be educational and entertaining, but they also have a kinship with Jorge Luis Borges's fictional work of Chinese scholarship, *The Celestial Emporium of Benevolent Knowledge*, which contains a whimsical taxonomy of the animal kingdom: those belonging to the Emperor; mermaids; stray dogs; those painted with a fine camel's-hair brush; those resembling flies from a distance; others; etc. Unfortunately, nothing links together all the things discussed as noir—not the theme of crime, not a cinematographic technique, not even a resistance to Aristotelian narratives or happy endings. Little wonder that no writer has been able to find the category's necessary and sufficient characteristics, and that many generalizations in the critical literature are open to question. If noir is American in origin, why does it have a French name? (The two Frenchmen who

HUMPHREY
BOGART
MARY
ASTOR
THE
Maltese
Falcon
by
DASHIELL
HAMMETT
Author of
"THE THIN MAN"
GLADYS GEORGE • PETER LORRE
BARTON MacLANE • LEE PATRICK • SYDNEY GREENSTREET
SCREEN PLAY BY JOHN HUSTON • A WARNER BROS. - FIRST NATIONAL PICTURE
Directed by
JOHN HUSTON
Presented by
WARNER BROS.

supposedly coined the term, writing separate essays in 1946, were referring to an international style.) More intriguingly, if the heyday of noir was 1941–58, why did the term not enjoy widespread use until the 1970s? A plausible case could indeed be made that, far from dying out with the old studio system, noir is almost entirely a creation of postmodern culture—a belated reading of classic Hollywood that was popularized by cinéastes of the French New Wave, appropriated by reviewers, academics, and film-makers, and then recycled on TV.

At any rate, a term that was born in specialist periodicals and revival theaters has now become a major signifier of sleekly commodified artistic ambition. Almost 20 percent of the titles currently on the National Film Preservation List at the Library of Congress are associated with noir, as are most of the early volumes in the British Film Institute "Film Classics" series. Meanwhile, "neo noirs" are produced by Hollywood with increasing regularity and prominence. Consider the last three American winners of the Grand Prize at Cannes: *Wild at Heart* (1991), *Barton Fink* (1992), and *Pulp Fiction* (1994). Consider also such big-budget television productions as "Twin Peaks," "Wild Palms" (marketed to ABC as "TV noir"), and "Fallen Angels."

Some of these instances might be described as "pastiche," but pastiche of what? The classical model is notoriously difficult to pin down, in part because it was named by critics rather than film-makers, who did not speak of film noir until well after it was established as a feature of academic writing. Nowadays, the term is ubiquitous, appearing in reviews and promotions of many things besides movies. If we want to understand it, or to make sense of genres or art-historical categories in general, we need to recognize that film noir belongs to the history of ideas as much as to the history of cinema; it has less to do with a group of artifacts than with a discourse—a loose, evolving system of arguments and readings, helping to shape commercial strategies and aesthetic ideologies.

It seems odd that film theorists did not arrive at this conclusion long ago. After all, the Name of the Genre (or Mood, or Generic Tendency, or whatever) functions in much the same way as the Name of the Author. Michel Foucault has pointed out that the "author function" is tied to the "institutional system that encompasses, determines, and articulates the universe of discourses."[4] The author, Foucault says, is chiefly a means of textual *classification*, allowing us to establish "a relationship of homogeneity, filiation, authentification of some texts by the use of others" (147). At bottom, these relationships are psychological "projections," governed by the belief that there must be "a point where contradictions are resolved, where incompatible elements are at last tied together or organized around a fundamental and originating contradiction" (151).

Could we not say exactly the same things about the "genre function"? And could we not ask of it many of the same questions that Foucault asks of authorship: What are the modes of existence of this discourse? Where has it been used, how can it circulate, and who can appropriate it? (160) In the case of film noir, one of the most amorphous yet important categories in film history, these questions seem particularly apt. As a start toward answering them, the following pages offer a commentary on early writings about noir. Instead of looking for the essential features of a group of films, I shall try to explain a paradox: film noir is both an important cinematic legacy and an idea we have projected onto the past.

Noir Is Born
Paris, 1946–59

The end of World War II in Paris gave rise to a noir sensibility, but this sensibility was expressed through many things besides cinema, and if I had to choose a representative artist of the period, it would not be a film-maker. Instead I would pick the somewhat Rimbaud-like personality Boris Vian, who was a friend of the surrealist Raymond Queneau and the existentialist Jean-Paul Sartre. Vian wrote witty avant-garde novels, proto-absurdist plays, satiric columns for *Les Temps Modernes*, music criticism for *Jazz Hot*, and over 500 Dylanesque protest songs (including "Le Déserteur," which has remained an anthem for French antiwar movements down to the present day); meanwhile, he also played trumpet and sang in the Club Tabou and other St-Germain nightspots. During his lifetime, however, he was best known for a *roman noir* that did not bear his name.

In the summer of 1946, Vian was approached by an editor who wanted to create a list of murder novels that would rival the popular, black-covered *Série noire* recently inaugurated at Gallimard. Within two weeks, Vian composed *J'irai cracher sur vos tombes* (*I'll Spit on Your Graves*), which he published under the name "Vernon Sullivan," an identity he adopted on several occasions, claiming to have translated Sullivan's work "from the American." An ultra-vio-

lent mixture of plot situations from William Faulkner's *Sanctuary* and Richard Wright's *Native Son*, the novel concerns a black man who passes for white in a Southern town and who exerts racial vengeance by dominating, raping, and murdering two white women. In a preface, Vian said that the book could never have been printed in the United States because it involved black violence against whites. But there were also problems in France, where *J'irai cracher* became the first novel to be prosecuted for obscenity since *Madame Bovary*. The case took a bizarre turn when a middle-aged Parisian salesman strangled his young mistress and committed suicide in a hotel room near the Gare Montparnasse, leaving an open copy of the book next to the murdered woman's body, one of its grisly passages underlined. Vian was briefly jailed and required to pay a fine, and for the rest of his life he suffered from notoriety and ill health. Although he remained active on the literary and cabaret scenes, he sometimes described himself as "*ex-écrivain, ex-trompettiste*." Then, in the summer of 1959, he entered a Paris movie theater to watch a press screening of French director Michel Gast's adaptation of *J'irai cracher*, a project he disliked but had been unable to prevent. As he sat alone in the dark auditorium, his heart failed and he died.[5]

The themes of Vian's life and work—indigo moods, smoky jazz clubs, American fiction, romantic isolation—resemble some of the movies of his day, and his scandalous novel foregrounds two issues that seem especially relevant to film noir: sexual violence and racial blackness or otherness. Psychoanalytic feminism tells us something about the first issue (much feminist theory grows out of the study of American films noirs), although the discussion needs to be historicized and linked to changing patterns of censorship. In regard to the second issue, we need a close examination of the metaphor of darkness. The discourse on noir grew out of a European male fascination with the instinctive (a fascination that was evident in most forms of high modernism), and many of the films admired by the French involve white characters who cross borders to visit Latin America, Chinatown, or the "wrong" parts of the city. When the idea of noir was imported to America, this implication was somewhat obscured; the term sounded more artistic in French, so it was seldom translated as "black cinema."[6]

Where my immediate purposes are concerned, Vian's life story is also relevant, because the publication and eventual adaptation of *J'irai cracher* coincide with what I would call the first age of film noir: the years between the postwar arrival of Hollywood movies in Paris and the beginnings of the French New Wave. We can never say when the first film noir was made, but everyone agrees that significant *writings* on American noir began to appear in French film journals in August, 1946, at exactly the moment when "Vernon Sullivan" was composing his novel. The term was used in discussions of five Hollywood features made during the war, all of which had just been exhibited in succession on Paris movie screens: *The Maltese Falcon*; *Double Indemnity*; *Laura*; *Murder, My Sweet*; and—somewhat surprisingly, in light of the fact that it disappears from most subsequent writings—*The Lost Weekend*. Another picture released in Paris that summer, *Woman in the Window*, described by one French reviewer as a "bourgeois tragedy," was later to become a noir classic.[7] The forthcoming MGM production of *The Postman Always Rings Twice* was mentioned alongside the initial group of five, and *Citizen Kane*, which was also mentioned, was placed in a class by itself. Critical discussion centered mainly on the first four thrillers—which, even though they were not exactly alike (*The Maltese Falcon* does not have a first-person narrator or flashbacks, and *Laura* is not based on a hard-boiled novel), seemed to belong together. These films would become the prototypical members of an emergent category, and they would have an unusual influence on French thinking for over a decade.

In one sense the French invented film noir, and they did so because local conditions predisposed them to view Hollywood in certain ways. As R. Barton Palmer has observed, France possessed a sophisticated film culture consisting of theaters, journals, and "ciné-clubs" where movies were treated as art rather than as commercial entertainment.[8] Equally important, the decade after the liberation saw a resurgence of Americanism among directors and critics, many of whom sought to refashion the French art cinema along the more "authentic" lines of Hollywood genre movies. A *nouvelle vague* would eventually grow out of this dialectic between America and Europe, and the so-called film noir—which was visibly indebted to European modernism—became the most important category in French criticism.

The French were also predisposed to invent noir because it evoked a golden age of their own cinema. They were quick to observe that the new Hollywood thrillers resembled such films as *Pépé le Moko* (1936), *Hotel du Nord* (1938), and *Le Jour se lève* (1939)—a group of "poetic-realist" melodramas set in an urban criminal milieu and featuring doomed protagonists

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who wore fedoras and behaved with sangfroid under pressure.[9] Indeed when *Double Indemnity* was released in the United States in 1944, a reviewer for *The Hollywood Reporter* noted that it was "more than a little reminiscent of the late lamented, excellent French technique." (To reassure moviegoers, he added, "This is not to say that it is 'arty'" [8/24/44].)

French writers might have recognized the equally significant contributions of other European nations. For example, they could have alluded to Hitchcock's British thrillers of the 1930s, and—had they known it—to Carol Reed's *Night Train to Munich* (1940). These were the films to which American reviewers compared the 1941 version of *The Maltese Falcon*; in fact, when Billy Wilder completed *Double Indemnity*, he told the *Los Angeles Times* that he intended to "out-Hitchcock Hitchcock."[10] Significantly, however, the French not only ignored the British, they also failed to mention the Germans.[11] Instead, the two earliest essays on film noir—Nino Frank's "Un nouveau genre policier: L'aventure criminelle," published in the socialist *L'Écran Français* in August, 1946, and Jean-Pierre Chartier's "Les Américains aussi font des films 'noirs,'" published three months later in the more conservative *Revue du cinéma* (an ancestor of *Cahiers du cinéma*)—treated the American pictures as if they had only a few Gallic predecessors.

For Nino Frank, it seemed that a young generation of Hollywood auteurs, led by Huston, Wilder, and Chandler, had rejected the sentimental humanism of "museum objects" like Ford, Capra, and Wyler.[12] The new film-makers specialized in the *policier*, which, according to Frank, always deals with the "social fantastic" and the "dynamism of violent death"(8); unlike earlier practitioners, however, the Americans were concerned with "criminal psychology," and were therefore making "criminal adventures" or "films 'noirs'" (14). Such films were convoluted, harsh, and misogynistic, but they made the characters in most movies seem like "puppets"(14). Moreover, they often employed a first-person narration and flashbacks that fragmented the story, producing a montage. Frank claimed that Sacha Guitry had been the first to use this technique, in *Le Roman d'un tricheur* (1936), but he wondered whether or not Hollywood had outclassed Paris. Henceforth, French cinéastes would need to make "somber" films in which there was "more dynamism in an unmoving shot than in a majestic panorama"(14).

Jean-Pierre Chartier also treated the American films as a group, but he disliked their "pessimism and disgust toward humanity," and suggested that the Breen Office had deflected the characters' sexual motives into an "obsessive criminal fatality."[13] Although he admired the first-person narration in *Murder, My Sweet* (which reminded him of "the old avant garde"), he was appalled by the moral effect of the series as a whole:

> One may speak of a French school of film noir, but *Le Quai des brumes* or *Hotel du Nord* have at least accents of rebellion, a fleeting image of love that gives hope for a better world, . . . and if the characters are desperate, they rouse our pity or sympathy. Nothing of that here: these are monsters, criminals whose evils nothing can excuse, whose actions imply that the only source for the fatality of evil is in themselves (70).

Reviewers in the United States had already seen a vague connection between the pictures discussed by Frank and Chartier, but they made no attempt to invent a new term.[14] *The New Yorker* described *Double Indemnity* as a "murder melodrama" (9/16/44), and the *Los Angeles Times* called it an "intellectual exercise in crime" (10/10/44). (*Times* critic Philip K. Scheuer noted, "I am sick of flash-back narration and I can't forgive it here.") *Newsweek* said that *Murder, My Sweet* was a "brass-knuckled thriller" (2/26/45), and *The Hollywood Reporter* remarked that Paramount seemed to be investing heavily in the "hard-boiled, kick-em-in-the-teeth murder cycle" (1/28/46). The American critics also grouped the films in unusual ways: the *Los Angeles Times* compared *Double Indemnity* to the MGM adaptation of William Saroyan's *The Human Comedy* (8/6/44); and Manny Farber, writing in *The New Republic*, compared it to Preston Sturges's *The Miracle of Morgan's Creek* (8/24/44).

French writers, on the other hand, were fascinated with the noir metaphor, and in subsequent discussions they elaborated the tensions between the Frank and Chartier essays. Over the next decade, as the category expanded and became the subject of retrospectives and catalogues raisonnés, French critics often praised noir for its dynamism, its cruelty, and its irrationality; but they also searched the dark Hollywood streets for what Chartier called "accents of rebellion" against the "fatality of evil." Some of the reasons behind this

On Dangerous Ground: Ida Lupino (opposite page, top); *Laura*: Dana Andrews and Gene Tierney (bottom)

potentially contradictory response were briefly evident during a round-table discussion at *Cahiers* in 1957, when André Bazin remarked in passing that in the French prewar cinema, "even if there wasn't exactly a genre there was a style, the realist *film noir*." Bazin was nostalgic for a lost national identity, but he also recognized that noir had philosophical or ideological significance; French films of the type, he argued, were indebted to surrealism and might have been developed along the lines of literary existentalism.[15]

As Bazin's remarks suggest, French discussion of American film noir was conditioned by the prevailing and sometimes conflicting trends in Left Bank intellectual culture. The importance of existentialism to the period has long been recognized; what needs to be emphasized is that French existentalism was intertwined with a residual surrealism, which was crucial for the reception of any art described as noir. Gallimard's *Série noire* was conceived and edited by Marcel Duhamel, who assisted in the development of the "Exquisite Corpse" game in 1925, and who participated in the surrealist *recherches* into sexuality during the early 1930s;[16] the *Anthologie d'humeur noir* (1940) was edited by André Breton himself; and critical discussion of films noirs in the 1950s was conducted chiefly in surrealist journals. Indeed, Nino Frank's seminal essay, which emphasizes "criminal adventure" and the "dynamism of violent death," is replete with surrealist values.

From their beginnings in the years after World War I, the surrealists had used cinema as an apparatus for the destruction of bourgeois art and the desublimation of everyday life. Breton and his associates would pop briefly in and out of movie theaters and write lyrical essays about their experiences, developing what Louis Aragon called a "synthetic" or tangential criticism that extracted latent, chiefly libidinal meanings from images or short sequences. This project was facilitated by movies with improbable, confusing, or incoherent narratives: the bad film, the crazy comedy, the horror film, and—especially in the post-World War II era—the Chandleresque detective film, which often lost control of its plot, becoming a series of hallucinatory adventures in the criminal underworld.[17]

The surrealists were "dreaming" cathected details from the cinematic mise-en-scène, but not just any detail caught their eye. They were attracted to the cinema of the "social fantastic," to stories about doomed erotic love, and to Hollywood thrillers with Sadeian titles. Among their particular favorites were movies about gangsterism and murder, partly because such pictures depicted violent, antisocial behavior, and partly because they bestowed an aura of the marvelous upon ordinary urban decor. As Aragon had written in 1918, American crime films "speak of daily life and manage to raise to a dramatic level a banknote on which our attention is riveted, a table with a revolver on it, a bottle that on occasion becomes a weapon, a handkerchief that reveals a crime, a typewriter that's the horizon of a desk. . . ."[18]

Aragon might well have been describing thrillers of the 1940s and 50s, which were perversely erotic, confined largely to interiors, photographed in a deep-focus style that seemed to reveal the secret life of things, and often derived from the literature of alcohol—a substance especially conducive to desire, enervation, euphoria, confusion, and nightmare. Not surprisingly, such films were admired and discussed in *L'Age du cinéma*, a surrealist publication of 1951, and in *Positif*, which maintained strong connections to surrealism throughout the 1950s and 60s. They were also given their first important study in a book that was profoundly surrealist in its ideological aims: Raymond Borde and Etienne Chaumeton's *Panorama du film noir américain* (1955), which has been described as a "benchmark" for all later work on the topic.[19]

Raymond Borde was a frequent contributor to *Positif* and an important second-generation surrealist. But we do not need to consult his or Chaumeton's vitae, since their intellectual heritage is apparent from the outset. The *Panorama* is introduced by Marcel Duhamel, who fondly recalls the years 1923–26, when he and other members of the surrealist group, including Breton, Raymond Queneau, Benjamin Péret, Jacques Prévert, and Yves Tanguy, watched American gangster films that were "curious, non-conformist, and as noir as one could desire."[20] If this were not enough, Borde and Chaumeton choose a phrase from Lautréamont, the surrealists' favorite poet, as an epigraph: "The bloody channels through which one passes to the extremities of logic."

Despite their obvious ideological purpose, however, Borde and Chaumeton often seem unclear or inconsistent. At various points they discuss film noir as a series, a cycle, a genre, a mood, and a Zeitgeist. In the introduction, Duhamel claims that noir is as old as cinema and has never been healthier, whereas in the text Borde and Chaumeton say that the American series began in 1941 and ended in 1953. (A postscript to the 1969 edition moves the end of noir forward to 1955, and then notes its "fascinating renaissance" in

such films as *Point Blank*, *Dirty Harry*, and *Badlands*.) Throughout, an "objective" tone serves as a mask for the celebration of kinky irrationality. Borde and Chaumeton have surprisingly little to say about visual style (the French were generally unimpressed by what Bazin called "plastics" or expressionist imagery); in fact they emphasize that the dark atmosphere of Hollywood crime movies is "*nothing in itself*" and ought not to be adopted for its own sake (180). On the other hand, they place great emphasis on the theme of death, and on the "essential" affective qualities of noir, which they list in the form of five adjectives typical of surrealism: "oneiric, bizarre, erotic, ambivalent, and cruel" (3).[21] Sometimes one of these qualities is said to dominate: *The Shanghai Gesture* (which had prompted one of the surrealist experiments in "irrational expansion") is supposedly "oneiric," whereas *Gilda* is "erotic" (3). Sometimes, too, the traits are unevenly distributed, with the "noir aspect" manifesting itself in a fragmentary or tangential form that resembles Aragon's synthetic criticism: "*The Set Up* is a good documentary about boxing: it becomes film noir in the sequence where accounts are settled by a savage beating in a blind alley. *Rope* is a psychological film that can be linked to the noir series only because of its spellbinding sadism" (3).

But according to Borde and Chaumeton, there are also noir narratives and characters; and at this level film noir becomes a full-fledged outlaw genre, systematically reversing Hollywood's foundational myths. True films of the type, Borde and Chaumeton insist, not only take place "inside the criminal milieu," but also represent "the point of view of criminals" (7). Such films are "moral" in an approximately surrealist sense: instead of incorruptible legal agents, they give us shady private eyes, crooked policemen, murderous plainclothes detectives, or lying district attorneys. Often they depict the gentry as corrupt, and whenever they deal with gangsters, they replace the "grand primitives" of earlier gangster movies like *Scarface* with angelic killers or neurotics (7).

It follows that the ideal noir hero is the opposite of John Wayne. Psychologically, he is passive, masochistic, morbidly curious; physically, he is "often mature, almost old, not very handsome. Humphrey Bogart is the type" (10). By the same logic, the noir heroine is no Doris Day. Borde and Chaumeton never allude to the Marquis de Sade's Juliette, one of the most famous sexual terrorists in French literature,[23] but the character they describe resembles her in every respect save the fact that she is "fatal even to herself" (10). Beautiful, adept with firearms, and "probably frigid," this new woman contributes to a distinctive noir eroticism, "which is usually no more than the eroticization of violence" (10).[24] Her best representative on the screen, Borde and Chaumeton argue, is Gloria Grahame, who, even though she was never cast as a femme fatale, always suggested "cold calculation and sensuality" (125).

Above all, Borde and Chaumeton are intrigued by the way film noir has "revived the theme of violence" (10). One of the major accomplishments of the series, they observe, is to replace the melodramatic combat of arms between hero and villain (the swordplay at the climax of a swashbuckler, the gun duel at the end of a Western, etc.) with a richly elaborated "ceremony of killing." Death in such films usually takes the form of a professional execution (a locus classicus is the 1946 adaptation of Hemingway's *The Killers*) or a sadistic ritual. In *The High Wall*, a publisher of religious books murders an elevator repairman by hooking an umbrella under the stool on which the man is standing, sending him plummeting down an empty shaft; in *Kiss of Death*, a demented gangster laughs as he shoves a little old lady in a wheelchair down a flight of stairs; in *Brute Force*, a fascistic prison guard tortures inmates with an elaborate, stylized brutality; and in *Border Incident*, an undercover policeman is slowly run over by a tractor while his helpless confederate stands by and watches.

"In this incoherent brutality," Borde and Chaumeton remark, "there is the feeling of a dream" (12). Indeed the narratives themselves are often situated on the margins of dreams, as if to intensify the surrealist atmosphere of violent confusion or disequilibrium that Borde and Chaumeton regard as the very basis of noir. "All the components of noir style," they write, are designed to "disorient the spectator" (14). At the cinema, "the public has become accustomed to certain conventions: a logical action, an evident distinction between good and evil, well-defined characters with clear motives, scenes that are more spectacular than brutal, a heroine who is exquisitely feminine and a hero who is honest" (14). The "vocation" of film noir is to reverse the conventional norms—thus creating a specific tension which results from the disruption of order and "*the disappearance of psychological bearings or guideposts*" (15).

But film noir was also a prisoner of conventions. Borde and Chaumeton contend that in the 1940s, films about crime and gangs possessed a bizarre quality reminiscent of the surrealists or Kafka; by the 1950s, however, social criticism was smothered by banal plot conventions, and "incoherence" became predictable

(180). Even the original pictures were beginning to look dated: at a 1953 revival of *Murder, My Sweet* presented by the Ciné-Club of Toulouse, people laughed whenever Philip Marlowe lost consciousness and disappeared into a black pool, and in the discussion afterward the picture was treated as a "parody of horror" (181).

From the perspective of the mid 1950s, it appeared that noir was dying. Borde and Chaumeton attribute this "decadence" to the exhaustion of a formula and to the rise of neorealist social-problem pictures. There were also several economic and political reasons for the decline of crime movies. In response to television and a diversified leisure industry, Hollywood was turning to Cinemascope, color, and Biblical epics; at the same time, several of the key writers and directors of the previous decade had been blacklisted by the major studios. As if to signal the end of a cycle, urban thrillers were increasingly being produced by B units or Poverty Row studios. Hence the two pictures of the 1950s that the *Panorama* singles out as truly disorienting were both filmed on low budgets. The first was *Gun Crazy* (1950), the story of a murderous heterosexual couple of "exemplary beauty"(9), which allows the woman to wear pants and act as the aggressive partner. Borde and Chaumeton regard this film as a pure and unself-conscious expression of the surrealist credo; in their words, it is "one of the rarest contemporary illustrations of *L'AMOUR FOU* (in every sense of that term)," and it deserves to be called "a sort of *L'Age d'Or* of the American film noir" (118). Next in importance is the Robert Aldrich adaptation of Mickey Spillane's *Kiss Me Deadly* (1955), which Borde and Chaumeton discuss in their 1969 "postface." Like *The Maltese Falcon*, this film involves a private eye and the search for a mysterious object; nevertheless, Borde and Chaumeton describe it as the "despairing opposite" of the picture that inaugurated the noir series: "From the eve of war to the society of consumption, the tone has changed. A savage lyricism throws us into a world in complete decomposition, ruled by debauchery and brutality; to the intrigues of these wild beasts and spectres, Aldrich provides the most radical of solutions: nuclear apocalypse" (277).

Nowadays, both *Kiss Me Deadly* and *Gun Crazy* sometimes provoke the same unwanted laughter that greeted *Murder, My Sweet* in 1953. Even so, Borde and Chaumeton's achievement in discussing these and other films is remarkable. Without complete access to American culture, they call attention to scores of interesting movies that might have been forgotten, and they create an entire category that functions *normatively*. Here and in many later writings, noir is not simply a descriptive term, but the name for a critical tendency within the popular cinema—an anti-genre that reveals the dark side of savage capitalism. For Borde and Chaumeton in particular, the essence of noirness lies in a feeling of discontinuity, an intermingling of social realism and oneiricism, an anarcho-leftist critique of bourgeois ideology, and an eroticized treatment of violence. We might debate whether these qualities are in fact essential to the Hollywood thriller (if any quality can be essential), but there is no question that they are fundamental to surrealist art.

Via the *Panorama* and several other writings, surrealism provided an organizing metaphor and a kind of aesthetic rationale for the film noir. Perhaps it also fostered the tendency of later critics to read individual pictures against the narrative grain, emphasizing tone or mood—a technique frequently used to bestow cult value on mass art. But as I have already indicated, French discussion of noir was also affected by existentialist literature and philosophy, which placed emphasis on different matters. Existentialism was despairingly humanist rather than perversely anarchic, and it had a different attitude toward violence; thus if the surrealists saw the Hollywood thriller as a theater of cruelty, the existentialists saw it as an absurdist novel. For critics who were influenced by existentialism, film noir was especially attractive because it depicted a world of obsessive return, dark corners, and *huis clos*. It often employed settings like the foggy seaside diner in *Fallen Angel*, where Dana Andrews gets off a bus and seems unable to leave. ("I'm waiting for something to happen," he tells Alice Faye. "Nothing's going to happen," she responds.) Or like the dark highway in *Detour*, where Tom Neal keeps thumbing a ride to a violent destiny.

In the years before and after the war, when the French themselves were entrapped by history, several themes of French existential philosophy had been elaborated through readings of such novelists as Hammett, Chandler, and Cain, who were often bracketed with Wright, Hemingway, Dos Passos, and Faulkner; indeed the French "discovered" several of these talents, just as they later discovered the Hollywood auteurs. In 1946, even Faulkner was a relatively neglected figure in the United States, where most of

Shoot the Piano Player: Charles Aznavour (opposite page, top); *Breathless*: Jean-Paul Belmondo (bottom)

his income came from movies like *The Big Sleep* and from a story he had published in *Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine*; meanwhile, Jean-Paul Sartre described him as a "god." The interest of Parisian intellectuals in a certain kind of American fiction became so intense that the British author Rebecca West teased James M. Cain, "You were a fool not to be born a Frenchman. The highbrows would have put you with Gide and Mauriac if you had taken this simple precaution."[25]

There was truth in West's observation. The French liked their Americans exotic, violent, and romantic;[26] they wrote a great deal about Southern Gothicism and tough-guy modernism, and they usually ignored anyone who did not offer what André Gide called "a foretaste of Hell." Gide himself declared that Hammett's *Red Harvest* was "the last word in atrocity, cynicism, and horror";[27] André Malraux described Faulkner's *Sanctuary* as "the intrusion of Greek tragedy into the thriller"; and Albert Camus confessed that he had been inspired to write *The Stranger* after reading Cain's *The Postman Always Rings Twice*.[28]

This passion for literary toughness has an interesting relation to the social and political climate after the war. Some American and French authors who had once been Marxist, such as John Dos Passos and André Malraux, completely reversed themselves; others, such as Dashiell Hammett, were imprisoned or blacklisted. The left had been in disarray in the West since the Nazi-Soviet pact, and the situation in France was complicated by the fact that the country had recently emerged from what the French themselves described as *les années noires*—a time of torture, compromise, and collaboration.[28] Faced with a choice between capitalism and Stalinism, many French artists tried to achieve "freedom" through individualized styles of resistance. For them, prewar American novels offered a model—especially novels depicting a violent, corrupt world in which ambiguous personal action is the only redemptive gesture. In *Qu'est-ce que la littérature?* (1947), Sartre wrote,

> As for the Americans, it was not their cruelty or pessimism which moved us. We recognized in them men who had been swamped, lost in too large a continent, as we were in history, and who tried, without traditions, with the means available, to render their stupor and forlornness in the midst of incomprehensible events.[29]

That same year, Sartre claimed that modern life had become "fantastic," as if it were made up of a "labyrinth of hallways, doors, and stairways that lead nowhere, innumerable signposts that dot routes and signify nothing."[30] To convey such a life, he advocated a literature of "extreme situations" that was narrated ambiguously, without "all-knowing witnesses" (154–55). The novel, he insisted, must shift from "Newtonian mechanics to generalized relativity"; it should be peopled with "minds that [are] half lucid and half overcast, some of which we might consider with more sympathy than others, but none of which [should] have a privileged point of view" (155).

Sartre was particularly impressed by Faulkner's experiments with multiple-perspective narration in *The Sound and the Fury* (1929), but he also praised the way Americans used a free-indirect style. In 1938, he had argued that Dos Passos was the greatest contemporary novelist; as proof, he quoted a passage from *USA* describing a fistfight in a Paris café:

> Joe laid out a couple of frogs and was backing off towards the door, when he saw in the mirror that a big guy in a blouse was bringing down a bottle on his head with both hands. He tried to swing around but he didn't have time. The bottle crashed his skull and he was out.

Here was pure existential consciousness, divested of authorial comment, observing itself in a mirror and registering the action like a camera obscura, as if Descartes and Bergson were the "couple of frogs" laid out on the café floor. Here, too, though Sartre did not say so, was the familiar voice of American pulp fiction. Sartre believed that this voice amounted to "a technical revolution in the art of telling a story," and for over a decade he and other French novelists tried to emulate its effects, aiming for what Roland Barthes later described as a zero-degree style.[31]

Unlike the surrealists, who made the movies essential to their project, the existentialists were literary and somewhat dubious of Hollywood. Nevertheless, given the intellectual climate Sartre helped establish, it is not surprising that French cinéastes embraced American thrillers with special fervor. These pictures were often based on the novels of respected authors; they were sometimes narrated from multiple points of view; and they offered an attractively labyrinthine, enclosed mise-en-scène peopled with alienated characters. Thus in 1955 Eric Rohmer observed, "Our immediate predilection tends to be for faces marked with the brand of vice and the neon lights of bars rather

than the ones which glow with wholesome sentiments and prairie air."[32]

Rohmer and most of his colleagues at *Cahiers du cinéma* belonged to a younger generation that imbibed its existentialism and phenomenology through Bazin, who was a more conservative and in some ways a more consistent writer than Sartre. In *Qu'est-ce que la littérature?*, Sartre had struggled to reconcile modernist narration with political engagement; Bazin could avoid the problem, because his essays, posthumously collected in *Qu'est-ce que le cinéma?* (1958–62), were couched in terms of moral dilemmas or the problem of death. Like all the French, Bazin was interested in modern American fiction, and he often used a Sartrean vocabulary ("freedom," "fate," "authenticity," etc.); in fact, many of his theoretical writings seem to have been derived from Sartre, minus any hint of Marxism. On the grounds of "realism," Sartre had wanted to do away with both omniscient narration and temporal ellipsis in the novel; modern narratives, he argued, should resemble *Ulysses*, giving detailed renditions of a day, an hour, or even a minute (158). For his part, Bazin believed that cinema could achieve "the asymptote of reality" through long takes or *temps morts*, such as the coffee-making sequence in *Umberto D.* In place of Sartre's neutral or ambiguous literary narrators, Bazin valorized the camera, which he regarded as a phenomenology machine that could preserve ambiguous reality without the tendentious intervention of a human hand.

Bazin's style of existentialism is everywhere apparent in his 1957 eulogy for Humphrey Bogart, written only two years before his own death. According to Bazin, Bogart was important because "the *raison d'être* of his existence was in some sense to survive," and because the alcoholic lines on his face revealed "the corpse on reprieve within each of us" (Hillier, 98). Jean Gabin, the star of prewar French films noirs, seemed romantic by comparison; Bogart was a man "*defined* by fate," and because he was associated with "the *noir* crime film whose ambiguous hero he was to epitomize," he became the quintessential "actor/myth of the postwar period" (Hillier, 99). Bazin argued that Bogart's portrayal of Sam Spade was theoretically equivalent to the almost simultaneous release of *Citizen Kane*: "It must be the case," he wrote, "that there is some secret harmony in the coincidence of these events: the end of the prewar period, the arrival of a certain novelistic style of cinematographic *écriture*, and, through Bogart, the triumph of interiorization and ambiguity" (Hillier, 100).

The "ambiguity" of which Bazin speaks is quite different from the disorientation or inversion of moral norms valued by the surrealists. It has more to do with ethical complexity, and with the cinema's ability to capture what Bazin elsewhere calls the "structure of reality" in all its phenomenological uncertainty. Likewise, Bazin's "interiorization" has little to do with the Freudian subconscious. It suggests instead a radical isolation or individuality that forces the subject to create identity out of existential choice. Bazin apparently believes that the "secret harmony" linking Bogart and Welles is a byproduct of what French literary critic Claude-Edmonde Magny (in a book heavily influenced by Sartre) had called "the age of the American novel."[33] On a more general level, however, the themes of isolation, uncertainty, and ambiguity must have exerted a strong appeal to anyone who was wary of collective politics and inclined to treat social issues in terms of personal ethics.

During this period, younger critics at *Cahiers* began to project Bazin's ideas onto films noirs, which became existential, depoliticized allegories of the white male condition. The favored existential hero, however, was not Bogart but Nicholas Ray, who directed *They Live by Night*, *In a Lonely Place*, and *On Dangerous Ground*. François Truffaut wrote that the essential theme of Ray's films was "moral solitude" (Hillier, 107), and Jacques Rivette argued that Ray was concerned with "the interior demon of violence, which seems linked to man and his solitude" (Hillier, 105). At this juncture, "film noir" and "auteur" began to work in tandem, expressing the same values from different angles. (It is no accident that the two terms would enter the English language at the same moment.) Film noir was a collective style operating within and against the Hollywood system; and the auteur was an individual stylist who achieved freedom over the studio through existential choice. But the auteur was more important than the genre. Unlike Borde and Chaumeton, who used the names of directors only as a convention of French scholarship, the *Cahiers* group always subordinated general forms to personal visions. In other words, France was not far from the *nouvelle vague*.

To see what the future had in store, we need only consult Claude Chabrol's 1955 *Cahiers* review of *Kiss Me Deadly*. Like Borde and Chaumeton, Chabrol regarded this picture as a watershed, although he believed its significance had less to do with the end of a genre than with the creation of a cinema of authors. By the mid 1950s, Chabrol argued, the literary sources of film noir had "dried up," and the plots and mises-en-scène were clichéd. There was no question of renew-

ing the form, but it had become a "wonderful pretext" (Hillier, 160):

> [*Kiss Me Deadly*] has chosen to create itself out of the worst material to be found, the most deplorable, the most nauseous product of a genre in a state of putrefaction: a Mickey Spillane story. Robert Aldrich and A. I. Besserides have taken this threadbare and lackluster fabric and woven it into rich patterns of the most enigmatic arabesques (Hillier, 163).

Clearly, an art cinema based on transformation of "the worst material" was about to appear. In 1959, Godard's *Breathless* was released, and Truffaut's *Shoot the Piano Player* soon followed. Both films were fusions of Bazinian neorealism and surrealist disjunctions; both were littered with references to Bogart, *Gun Crazy*, *On Dangerous Ground*, etc.;[34] and both made film noir available as a "pretext" for directors who wanted to assert their personalities. Also in 1959, Boris Vian died in a Paris movie theater. The first age of film noir had come to an end.

Darkness Everywhere

The discourse on noir was initiated by two generations of Parisian intellectuals who announced the death of the form soon after they discovered it. But crime in the city, which has always been one of America's favorite themes, continued to be exploited by politicians, journalists, and artists of every kind. Eventually, French critical terminology migrated to Britain and America, where it exerted considerable influence and acquired new interpreters. By the 1990s, it had become what Dennis Hopper describes as "every director's favorite genre."[35]

A complete history of noir in America would take into account such things as New York film culture in the East Village during the late 1950s, or the Bogart cult that developed at the Brattle Theater in Cambridge, Mass., in the early 1960s. It would look closely at the role of alternative criticism and college film societies in the late 1960s and early 1970s. On a more general level, it would consider the Vietnam war (a structuring absence in Paul Schrader's "Notes on *Film Noir*"); the rise of academic film theory; the vast changes in the economics and censorship of Hollywood; and the increasing dissolution of discursive boundaries between high and commercial art.

Today, the "original" films noirs still circulate alongside new ones. The noir mediascape in the late twentieth century spreads across virtually every national boundary and every form of communication, including museum retrospectives, college courses, parodies, remakes, summertime blockbusters, mass-market paperbacks, experimental literature and painting, made-for-TV films (there is a significant B-movie industry known in the trade as "cable noir"), and soft-core "erotic thrillers" that go directly to video stores. Why has noir become so important? The answer is beyond the scope of an essay, but it seems obvious that the idea of film noir has been useful to the movie industry, providing artistic cachet and spectacular opportunities for both the "New Hollywood" auteurs of the 1970s and the sex-and-violence specialists of the 1980s. The more interesting question is whether a category developed by critics to influence what Borde and Chaumeton called "the occidental and American public of the 1950s" (5) can function in the same way for us.

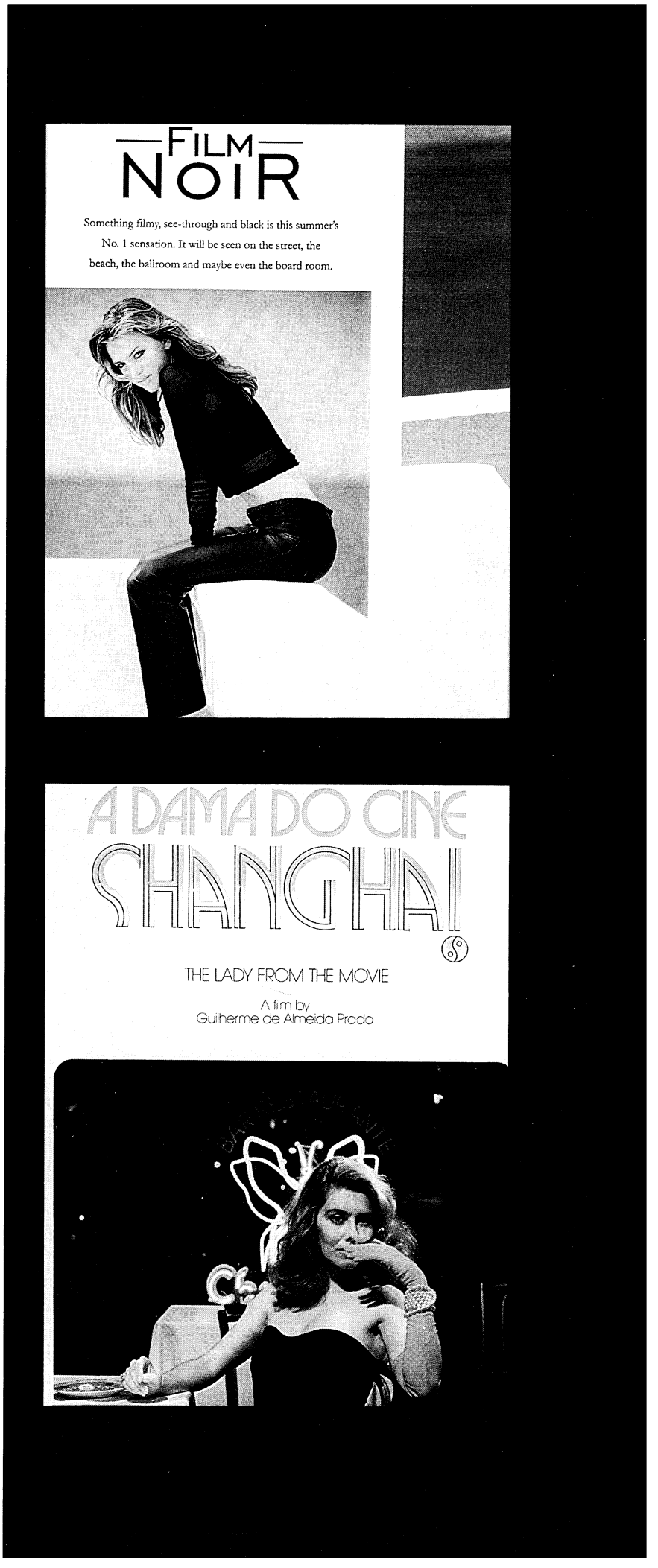
If we could ask the original French commentators what film noir represented, they might agree that, for all its romanticism, it was a challenge to Hollywood conventions: it used unorthodox narration; it resisted sentiment and censorship; it reveled in the "social fantastic"; it demonstrated the ambiguity of human motives; and it made commodity culture seem like a wasteland. Later European art directors (including not only Godard and Truffaut but also Resnais in *Last Year at Marienbad*, Wenders in *The American Friend*, and Fassbinder in *The American Soldier*) saw noir as a dying form that could be deconstructed or transmogrified; it could retain its psychological and social edge, but it needed to be treated at a self-reflexive distance.

In the 1990s, when the media are pervasive and the counterculture hardly exists, film noir represents something far more complicated. Good and bad examples are created in every mode of production, but Hollywood usually *re*constructs its old pictures, borrowing the allusive technique of 1960s and 70s art films to make audiences feel sophisticated.[36] This strategy also extends beyond Hollywood, as two exhibits will serve to illustrate. First is the cover of a press kit for *A Dama do Cine Shanghai* (*The Lady from the Shanghai Cinema*, 1987) by Brazilian director Guilherme de Almeida Prado, in which the star image of Rita Hayworth is used in a nostalgic, somewhat campy way to suggest a movie about movies. Second is a page from the fashion section of the *New York Times Magazine* of May 23, 1993, showing a

model dressed in a "film noir." The caption tells us that "Something filmy, see-through and black is this summer's No. 1 sensation. It will be seen on the street, the beach, the ballroom and maybe even the board room."

Quite obviously, a concept that was generated ex post facto has become part of a worldwide mass memory; a dream image of bygone glamour, it represses as much history as it recalls, usually in the service of cinephilia and commodification. Not every recent instance of film noir (even Prado's work) can be explained in this way, and it would be naïve to assume that the classic films noirs were ever free of show business and the consumer economy. Nevertheless, the term now plays a central role in the vocabulary of ludic, commercialized postmodernism.[37] Depending on how it is used, it can describe a dead period, a nostalgia for something that never existed, or perhaps even a vital tradition. One thing is clear: the last film noir is no easier to name than the first. A fully historicized account of the category would range across the twentieth-century imagination, and would require a more nimble analysis than anyone has attempted.

- James Naremore, the author of *The Films of Vincente Minnelli* and other books, is writing a cultural history of American film noir.



Notes

1. Film noir is described as a genre by, among others, Robin Buss, *French Film Noir* (London: Marion Boyars, 1994); Charles Higham and Joel Greenburg, *Hollywood in the Forties* (New York: A. S. Barnes, 1968); Foster Hirsch, *The Dark Side of the Screen* (New York: A. S. Barnes, 1981); Alain Silver and Elizabeth Ward, eds., *Film Noir: An Encylopedia of the American Style* (Woodstock, N.Y.: Overlook Press, rev. ed., 1992); and Jon Tuska, *Dark Cinema: American Film Noir in Cultural Perspective* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1984). Noir is a movement or period characterized by "tone and mood" in Paul Schrader, "Notes on *Film Noir*," in *Film Genre Reader*, ed. Barry Keith Grant (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 1986), pp. 167–82; a set of "patterns of nonconformity" within the classical Hollywood style in David Bordwell, Janet Staiger, and Kristin Thompson, *The Classical Hollywood Cinema* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1985); a series in Raymond Borde and Eugene Chaumeton, *Panorama du film noir américain, 1941–1953* (Paris: Editions du Minuit, 1955); a motif and tone in Raymond Durgnat, "Paint It Black: The Family Tree of Film Noir," *Cinema* nos. 6–7 (1970), pp. 49–56; a visual style in J. A. Place and L. S. Peterson, "Some Visual Motifs of *Film Noir*," *Film Comment,* vol. 10, no. 1 (1974), pp. 13–18; a canon in J. P. Telotte, *Voices in the Dark: The Narrative Patterns of Film Noir* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1989); a phenomenon in Frank Krutnik, *In a Lonely Street: Film Noir, Genre, Masculinity* (London: Rutgers, 1991); and a transgeneric phenomenon in R. Barton Palmer, *Hollywood's Dark Cinema: The American Film Noir* (New York: Twayne, 1994). For an argument similar to Palmer's, see John Belton, "Film Noir's Knights of the Road," *Bright Lights Film Journal* 12 (Spring 1994), pp. 5–15.
2. The dates 1941–1958 seem to have been first proposed by Schrader, who used *The Maltese Falcon* and *Touch of Evil* to mark the beginning and end of the noir period. Schrader's position is accepted by Place and Peterson, and by a few writers in E. Ann Kaplan, ed., *Women in Film Noir* (London: BFI, 1980). Several other books on film noir implicity endorse this periodization, even when they do not set fixed dates; see, for example, Telotte and Krutnik. Most recent discussions treat film noir as a genre that begins somewhere in the late 30s or early 40s and continues to the present day; see Palmer, and many of the essayists in Joan Copjec, ed., *Shades of Noir* (London: Verso, 1993). In the Copjec volume, there are skeptical voices; see especially Marc Vernet, "*Film Noir* on the Edge of Doom," pp. 1–31, who questions many of the standard historical and stylistic assumptions.
3. The Silver and Ward encyclopedia omits a number of titles that might logically be called film noir, but as Marc Vernet has noted, one of the beauties of the category is that "there is always an unknown film to be added to the list." For a larger filmography, see Spencer Selby, *Dark City: The Film Noir* (Jefferson, N. C.: McFarland, 1984).
4. "What Is an Author?," in V. Harari, ed., *Textual Strategies* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1979), p. 153. All further references are noted in the text.
5. See Philippe Boggio, *Boris Vian* (Paris: Flammarion, 1993). See also James Campbell, "Sullivan, the Invisible Man," *Times Literary Supplement* (January 28, 1994), p. 7. *J'irai cracher* was later transformed into a low-budget American horror film entitled *I Spit on Your Grave*, which does not acknowledge Vian's novel or the earlier French picture as sources; this film is discussed by Carol Clover in *Men, Women, and Chainsaws* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1992). I am grateful to Peter Wollen for calling my attention to Boris Vian and his relevance to the history of noir.
6. Higham and Greenburg use "Black Cinema" as the title for their chapter on noir, but they employ the French term when they discuss films. For an interesting paper on films noirs directed by African Americans, see Manthia Diawara, "Noir by Noirs: Toward a New Realism in Black Cinema," in Copjec, ed., pp. 261–78.
7. Jacques Bourgeois, "La Tragédie policier," *Revue du cinéma* 2 (1946), pp. 70–72.
8. Palmer is almost the only writer on film noir to have recognized that movies have different meanings for different audiences. My survey of French criticism differs from his in substantial ways, but I recommend his excellent survey of writings on noir in *Hollywood's Dark Cinema*, pp. 1–31.
9. For recent discussions of these films in English, see Edward Byron Turk, *Child of Paradise: Marcel Carné and the Golden Age of French Cinema* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989); Alan Williams, *Republic of Images: A History of French Filmmaking* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1992); and Dudley Andrew, *Mists of Regret* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1995). In a talk at the 1994 Society for Cinema Studies Conference (scheduled for publication in *Iris*), Charles O'Brien showed that the term "film noir" was widely used by the French in discussions of their own cinema during the 1930s.
10. *The Philadelphia Inquirer* wrote that *The Maltese Falcon* was "worthy to stand with the English-made mysteries of Alfred Hitchcock" (10/25/41), and the *New York Times* described John Huston as "a coming American match for Alfred Hitchcock" (10/12/41). *Time* compared *Falcon* with films by Hitchcock and Carol Reed (10/20/41). Wilder's statement about Hitchcock is quoted from the *Los Angeles Times* (8/6/44).
11. The omission of Germany is not surprising, but the French also failed to mention that the vogue for James M. Cain started outside America. As many subsequent writers have noted, *The Postman Always Rings Twice* was adapted by the French themselves in 1939, and by the Italians in 1943. Another British film that might logically have been discussed was *Hotel Reserve* (1944), which was based on a novel by Eric Ambler. Directed by Lance Comfort and starring James Mason and Herbert Lom, this picture now looks quite noirish.
12. Nino Frank, "Un nouveau genre policier: L'aventure

criminelle," *L'Écran Français* 61 (28 August, 1946), p. 14. (My translation.) Hereafter noted in the text. Frank mentions Hitchcock's *Suspicion* in company with other recent crime films, but he regards it as an "absolute failure," unworthy of comparison with *Double Indemnity*.

13. Jean-Pierre Chartier, "Les Américains aussi font des films 'noirs,'" *Revue du cinéma* 2 (1946), p. 67. (My translation.) Hereafter noted in the text.
14. One exception to this rule was Siegfried Kracauer, writing in the same month that the French coined the term film noir ("Hollywood's Terror Films: Do They Reflect an American State of Mind?," *Commentary* 2 [August 1946], pp. 132–36). Kracauer had recently completed *From Caligari to Hitler*, his book about German expressionist cinema, and he used the same arguments to discuss a recent spate of American "terror films," including *Shadow of a Doubt*, *The Stranger*, *The Dark Corner*, *The Spiral Staircase*, and *The Lost Weekend*. His essay is discussed briefly in Telotte, pp. 4–5, and extensively in Edward Dimendberg, *Film Noir and Urban Space*, Ph.D. Diss., University of California at Santa Cruz, 1992, pp. 116–63.
15. Bazin's comments are part of an exchange with Roger Leenhardt in "Six Characters in Search of *auteurs*," *Cahiers du cinéma: The 1950s*, ed. Jim Hillier (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1985), trans. Liz Heron, p. 37.
16. For information on Duhamel's involvement with surrealism, see Marcel Jean, ed., *The Autobiography of Surrealism* (New York: Viking Press, 1980). See also José Pierre, ed., *Investigating Sex: Surrealist Discussions 1928–1932*, trans. Malcom Imrie (London: Verso, 1992).
17. Both the plots and the dialogue of hard-boiled thrillers created confusion, and this was not always to the liking of American reviewers. In *The New Republic* (8/24/44), Manny Farber claimed that *Double Indemnity* was "the most incomprehensible film in years." He praised it for being "much less repressed than usual," but he disliked the incessant talk: "I think you could get at the Underlying Thread of this film the same as you could in *The Maltese Falcon*—by being allowed to take the dialogue home with you to study at length."
18. Louis Aragon, "On Decor," in *The Shadow and Its Shadow: Surrealist Writings on Cinema*, ed. Paul Hammond (London: BFI, 1978), p. 29. I am indebted to Hammond's introduction to this volume, which provides an excellent commentary on surrealist film criticism.
19. Silver and Ward, p. 372.
20. Marcel Duhamel, "Preface," in Borde and Chaumeton, p. vii. (My translation.) Subsequent references are cited in the text. Duhamel alludes to several unnamed gangster films starring George O'Brien, and to William Wellman's *Chinatown Nights*. The Wellman film, however, was not released until 1929.
21. *Onirique, insolite, erotique, ambivalent, et cruel.* I have translated *insolite* as "bizarre," but there is no good English equivalent. It connotes the Gothic, somewhat like the Freudian *unheimlich*, but with a more shocking or horrific effect. Judging from its frequency, *insolite* is the most important adjective in the *Panorama*.
22. For a brilliant discussion of this character, see Angela Carter, *The Sadeian Woman* (New York: Pantheon, 1979). Carter points out that Juliette is simply the mirror image of Justine, Sade's best-known feminine character. In contrast to Justine, who is derived from the virginal heroines of the sentimental novel, Juliette appropriates the weapons of patriarchy and uses them for her own ends. In one sense she is a radical or revolutionary figure; but she is also a figment of the male imagination and a product of the very system she exploits. Her most obvious representative in the contemporary cinema is the anti-heroine of John Dahl's *The Last Seduction* (1994), who vanquishes all the men in her path and rides off in the back seat of a chauffer-driven limousine.
23. Compare Sharon Stone's comments to a reporter about the role she played in *Basic Instinct* (1992): "I never thought the character really cared about sex at all. That's why it was so easy for her to use her sexuality—it had no value." *Parade Magazine* (January 30, 1994), p. 10.
24. Quoted by Roy Hoopes, *Cain: The Biography of James M. Cain* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1982), p. xiii.
25. French admiration for American movies was often condescending, as if Hollywood were filled with charming primitives, unburdened by European sophistication. Godard, for example, argued that "The Americans, who are much more stupid when it comes to analysis, . . . have a gift for the kind of simplicity which brings depth. . . . The Americans are real and natural." (Quoted in Hillier, p. 8.)
26. Quoted by Diane Johnson, *Dashiell Hammett: A Life* (New York: Random House, 1983), p. 322, n. 7. See also Perry Miller, "Europe's Faith in American Fiction," *Atlantic Monthly* (December 1951), pp. 50–56.
27. See Hoopes, p. xiv.
28. For a detailed account of the politics of French intellectuals in the period, see Tony Judt, *Past Imperfect: French Intellectuals, 1944–1956* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1992).
29. Jean-Paul Sartre, "The Situation of the Writer in 1947," in *What Is Literature?*, trans. Bernard Frechtman (New York: Washington Square Press, 1966), p. 156. Hereafter noted in the text.
30. Quoted by Dana Polan, *Power and Paranoia: History, Narrative, and the American Cinema, 1940–1950* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986), p. 252.
31. For a discussion of Sartre's ideas about Dos Passos, see Robert Denoon Cumming's introduction to *The Philosophy of Jean-Paul Sartre* (New York: The Modern Library, 1966), pp. 3–47.
32. Rohmer went on to observe that film noir had reached a dead end. For his generation, he remarked, "The charm of these works lies in the delirious romanticism of their heroes and the modernism of their technique. Hollywood, shy of them for so long, suddenly noticed their existence, and a breath of the avant-garde made the studios tremble. What came of it? There is now enough distance for us to judge: the answer is very little, if anything" ("Rediscovering America," in Hillier, ed., p. 91).
33. Claude-Edmonde Magny, *The Age of the American Novel: The Film Aesthetic of Fiction Between the Two*

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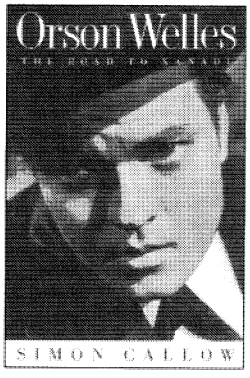
Wars, trans. Eleanor Hochman (New York: Ungar, 1972). This book, published in France in the 1950s, helped to transmit Sartre's ideas about the novel into French film theory.

34. For a listing of allusions to films noirs in *Breathless*, and for a useful survey of the French intellectual background, see Dudley Andrew, "*Breathless*: Old As New," in *Breathless*, ed. Dudley Andrew (Rutgers, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1987), pp. 3–20.
35. Quoted by Leighton Grist, "Moving Targets and Black Widows: Film Noir in Modern Hollywood," in *The Book of Film Noir*, ed. Ian Cameron (New York: Continuum, 1993), p. 267.
36. For an interesting commentary on this phenomenon, see Jonathan Rosenbaum, "Allusion Profusion," *Chicago Reader* (October 21, 1994), pp. 12, 25–26. I am grateful to Rosenbaum for his helpful suggestions on my own essay.
37. Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism: Or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1991). See a➞ Marcia Landy and Lucy Fischer, "*Dead Again* or A-Live Again: Postmodern or Postmortem?," *Cinema Journal*, vol. 33, no. 4 (Summer 1994), pp. 3–22.



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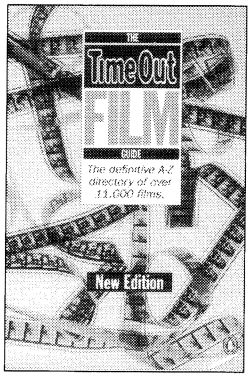

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Angelo Restivo

The Economic Miracle and Its Discontents

Bandit Films in Spain and Italy

In the early 1960s, the popular cultures of both Spain and Italy focused attention on the figure of the bandit. Nineteen sixty-one saw the first dramatic film by documentary film-maker Vittorio De Seta; *Banditi a Orgosolo* (*Bandits of Orgosolo*) not only took the prizes at the Venice Film Festival, it was also one of the films that marked the resurgence of the neorealist aesthetic after the detours of the late 1950s. The next year saw the release of *Salvatore Giuliano*, Francesco Rosi's film about the legendary Sicilian bandit. And in the following year, Carlos Saura's *Llanto por un bandido* (*Lament for a Bandit*) took as its subject the equally legendary "El Tempranillo" of Andalusia. In this time period, of course, Spain and Italy were at various stages of the economic miracle which was to radically change the face of both countries. Mass emigration to the cities and the depopulation of the countryside inevitably led to the disruption of traditional feudal and family-based values. The question is whether these films can be read through the historical and social changes wrought by the economic miracles and, if so, what can be learned about the cultural specificity of a national cinema and about the ways in which a national cinema appropriates genres and forms and makes them its own.

Crucial to such a reading of these films is an understanding of how the bandit is conceived culturally. Saura's use of the word "lament" in his film's title reveals the important truth that the bandit's story always, inevitably, results in a lament. The bandit is a figure of representation par excellence: he is the stuff of legend.[1] Thus the challenge of the bandit film is, first of all, to devise a way to tell a story that is already told.

More importantly, the fact that the bandit's story is one that must end in a lament tells us that the bandit, in his popular manifestations, is already figured as an *impossibility*, an ideal who takes on his own death the moment he assumes the "mask" of his mandate. (This is a trait that carries over to some of the manifestations of the urban gangster figure.) Historian Eric Hobsbawm, in his study of banditry, points out that the bandit is a figure who—in a hierarchical, rural social system—in some way refuses the position assigned him. Even the costume of the bandit, Hobsbawm notes, says "This man is not tame."[2] What makes someone a bandit—to invoke Lacanian terms—is a certain "founding act of negation": the bandit says "no" to something that everyone else says "yes" to. It is precisely this assumption of his own desire that

Salvatore Giuliano: The bandit marked by death

marks the bandit with death; and this is also what turns him into the "impossible" popular hero. Upon him are displaced the desires of an oppressed peasantry.

Historically, the bandit comes out of very concrete conditions: he is a figure of peasant societies, and specifically, from the mobile, surplus population of those societies. But while banditry is a phenomenon that has been constant throughout human history, the modern world has practically eliminated it. As Hobsbawm describes it, economic development, the emergence of modern communications, and the encroachment of the national bureaucracies into the countryside have removed the conditions necessary for banditry.[3]

Thus, the figure of the bandit is *doubly marked* by impossibility: at the level of legend and at the level of history. We can see, then, how interesting the bandit figure will appear to a society in the throes of the social dislocations connected with modernity. For the bandit at one and the same time speaks of a nostalgic ideal and the impossibility of its fulfillment; within the bandit we see not only the impossibility of our desire, but also the inevitability of history. Of course, a much larger historical process subtends the economic miracles that occurred in Spain and Italy, and that is the global restructuring of capitalism which today drives new national economic miracles around the globe. Thus a postmodern bandit film such as Peckinpah's *Pat Garrett and Billy the Kid* (1970) makes explicit some of the social-allegorical functions of the bandit that implicitly inform the Italian and Spanish films.

Economic Miracles, Cultural Shocks

For Spain and Italy, the 1960s were marked by an economic miracle whose effects were to profoundly change both countries. In Spain, a new ministry dominated by the Catholic lay organization Opus Dei—composed mainly of bourgeois technocrats spawned by what little economic development had already taken place—set forth the so-called Stabilization Plan in 1959. This was a deliberate strategy to throw off some of the economic restrictions of the Falangists. The immediate effect of these policies was widespread hardship—credit was restricted, public spending curbed, wages frozen—but within three years the annual growth rate of the Spanish economy became one of the highest in the world. Since all this new economic activity took place in the large cities and the coastal resort areas, there was a large-scale migration to the cities and a concomitant depopulation of the countryside. Historians have noted that probably the most important factor in enabling democracy to take root in Spain was the emergence of an urban middle class—that is, a middle class freed of the traditionalist mentality of the older, rural middle class. The economic miracle saw the birth of just such a middle class, both through entrepreneurship and through the rise in real income among skilled workers.[4]

The other major factor in the breaking down of the old, traditionalist Spain was the increasing presence of foreigners in the country. Spain needed capital investment to drive the economic reforms of the Stabilization Plan, and tourism was the most important source of revenue to pay for that investment.[5] Multinational corporations were encouraged to set up businesses in the country. This is why, in the 1960s, the Franco dictatorship found itself in a curiously contradictory

Llanto por un bandido

position regarding its own film production: on the one hand, Spain was actively seeking to promote itself as cosmopolitan to potential foreign visitors; on the other, it sought to control the circulation of images at home. We can see in this contradiction the underlying *pretense* that is perhaps imbricated in every fascism: the idea that the film, the cultural product, or the person is simply a performance before the audience of the world. Thus, one of the principle characteristics of Spanish cinema becomes the exploration of social performance, rather than the search for authenticity.

A humorous historical anecdote demonstrates just how profound was the impact of tourists on the newly urbanized, heretofore sheltered population. In the mid-60s, a strange new neurosis manifested itself among young male Spaniards working in the coastal cities. Marked by "insomnia, listlessness, and breathlessness," the syndrome was attributed to the shock for the young men—who, until they moved to the coast to work, had experienced only the tradition-bound villages where they were born—of the fast-paced lives and loose sexual mores of the tourists they came into contact with. As a result, the Civil Hospital in Málaga had to enlarge its psychiatric facilities, and dubbed the new wing "the waiters' ward."[6]

A similarly accelerated transition from feudal to modern, from rural to urban, can also be seen in Italy, where the postwar boom began in the 1950s. There are, however, important historical differences to consider. Italy, thanks to its artistic patrimony, had never experienced the kind of isolation from Europe that existed in Spain, and its relatively recent unification (in the 1860s) had already created a country profoundly divided in not just the distribution of wealth but also in social mores. As Gramsci noted, there are at least two Italys; he was the first to emphasize the "problem of the *Mezzogiorno*"—an area stretching roughly from the provinces south of Rome to the islands of Sicily and Sardinia.[7] In the south of Italy, it is a commonly held notion that unification had been engineered from the North, which set itself up as the industrial center while consigning the South to agriculture and, later, to the supply of cheap labor. Whatever the historical validity of this notion, the fact remains that the northern provinces of Italy developed more along the lines of its northern European neighbors, while the south of Italy remained poor, isolated, and backward.

The economic miracle of the 1950s led to a massive southern emigration to the north (a phenomenon explored in Visconti's *Rocco ed i suoi fratelli/Rocco and his Brothers*, 1960), leaving those remaining locked in a feudal economic and social system. One could say that until the 60s, the South experienced the economic miracle almost as if it were coming from a foreign country. In a way, it could cling to older values, while the rest of Italy was experiencing the shock of modernization. This can clearly be seen as the underlying dynamic of Germi's comedy *Sedotta e abbandonata* (*Seduced and Abandoned*, 1964), where the "feudal" sexual mores of the Sicilian family are looked at from the view of the more progressive capital city; the sharpness of the satire springs from the very division of the country.

In fact, the *commedia all'italiana*, the trenchant social comedies made during the 1950s, were the principal vehicle for exploring the effects of the economic miracle, as the earlier neorealist movement was either petering out or moving toward psychological or formal exploration. But by 1960, Pasolini was calling for a revival of a rigorous, socially engaged neorealism that would address the new problems of the urban underclass. It is in this aesthetic context that De Seta, in *Banditi a Orgosolo*, explores the problem of the *Mezzogiorno*—and particularly, the problem of Sardinia. Sardinia in 1962 was probably the most "hopeless" of the regions of Italy; as Hobsbawm notes, the interior of Sardinia was one of the few places in Europe where banditry actually still existed in the 1960s.[8] Locked in an agrarian/feudal economy of shepherdry, with a dialect that some linguists consider a different language than Italian, the island remained untouched by the economic miracle that was so radically transforming the country north of Rome, while at the same time, the forces of modernization that would irrevocably change Sardinia were already taking an interest in its development. (During the 1960s, the coastal areas of Sardinia were developed for tourism and by 1966 about 300,000 foreigners flocked annually to the island;[9] in this respect, Sardinia was following the Spanish model of development.) Thus, for the North, Sardinia was at the same time a problem and a site for its own anxieties about modernization.

Llanto por un bandido

Clearly, the social changes wrought in Spain by the emerging economic development of the 1950s were a concern for Carlos Saura: *Los Golfos*

(*Hooligans*, 1959) was an exploration of the lives of aimless street toughs in the periphery of Madrid, an underclass and an urban space created by the modernizing forces at work in the country. In this respect, *Los Golfos* has important connections to Pasolini's film of the same period, *Accattone* (1961)—the Italian film also takes its setting and characters from the newly spawned *borgate* surrounding Rome. A quick comparison of how these two films treat essentially the same subject can yield important insights into the different strategies of Spanish and Italian cinema of the period. *Accattone* is a rigorous return to the neorealism of the late 1940s; the "something else" that makes Pasolini's film more than just an exercise in the recreation of an earlier style is the insistent homosexual desire in his gaze, a desire that eroticizes the space of the images. *Los Golfos* was also seen as the embodiment of a Spanish neorealism;[10] but we could say that the "something else" in Saura's film is a certain reflexive quality, a concern with how images themselves function ideologically.[11]

Lament for a Bandit also has this reflexive quality, as both Marsha Kinder and Marvin D'Lugo note: the scene where the bandit José Maria battles Lutos with cudgels for control of the gang is a restaging of Goya's *Duelo a garrotazos*; there are intertextual references to Merimée and Gustave Doré and the creation of the "Andalusian myth"; and in the key scene where an English artist paints a portrait of José Maria ("El Tempranillo"), painting itself becomes one of the signifiers of the scene. Historically, José Maria found himself caught between the forces of Royalists and Republicans; thus Saura's distancing devices, as D'Lugo rightly notes, can serve to show how representations themselves are appropriated for political ends, how the conflicts of the Civil War can be seen to have been already framed by popular images and myths.

It is interesting to see what devices Saura uses to overcome the problematic narrative of the bandit film—its reliance on a story that is already told. His solution to this problem can best be seen by considering three formal strategies: the use of ballads on the sound track; the introduction of ellipses both within and between scenes; and the camera positioning that consistently dislocates the spatial orientation.

Throughout the film traditional Andalusian ballads of El Tempranillo are laid over key scenes. While this is an appropriation of a convention of the Hollywood Western, there is a key difference: the Western generally does not revert to the popular ballads themselves, but rather reorchestrates them to create a transparence in the sound track (that is, to avoid any disruption as we move from ballad to other non-diegetic "mood" music or effects). In *Lament*, the persistent use of the traditional ballads always reminds us that the story is already written.

Yet Saura's visual stylistics tend to undercut this sense of inevitability, tend to create narrative surprises where the spectator is forced to construct the story as if it hadn't already happened. There is, for example, a very elegant shot in a hostage-swapping scene in the middle of the film, which retroactively confers meaning on the sequences that precede it. Those earlier scenes establish, by crosscutting, that José Maria's wife has been kidnapped and that José Maria's band has comandeered a stagecoach. At this point, however, there seems to be no narrative logic to the crosscutting. Next, an overhead panorama presents us with an odd configuration of people on a large plain. Then, from closer in, someone fires into the air. Finally, the shot central to the argument here: a medium shot tracks right with a beautiful blonde woman (who was a passenger in the stagecoach). We are unsure what is happening until José Maria's wife suddenly appears screen right. At this point, the camera stops tracking, allows the other woman to leave the frame, and begins a reverse track, this time following the wife. It is only at this point that we realize the blonde was a hostage taken to insure the return of José Maria's wife, and this allows us retroactively to make sense of the previous, confusing crosscutting. Here, the ellipses and the restrictive camera angle temporarily disrupt our sense of where we are in the story; there is the illusion that possibilities have opened up in the "closed" form of the ballad. In this way, the film is playing precisely on the "double position" that is built into the bandit story: the film activates the impossible desire that things could be otherwise, only to then remind us that our own desire is nostalgic illusion. In other words, it quite literally reenacts our own ambivalence toward modernity and change.

The portrait of José Maria that the English artist paints holds the key to how the film works to articulate this problematic relation to the future. Here, it would be useful to look not at the much-discussed scene in which the portrait is painted, but at the scene when the painting reappears. It is a pivotal scene: José Maria—disillusioned, lost, his wife killed—is offered amnesty by the king if he will betray his (now former) band. Suddenly, we find ourselves in an interior, in a medium-close-up of José Maria, smoking a cigar, thinking. The shot holds on the medium-close-up for a long

time. Then there is a cut to a wide-angle shot of the room: we are now behind José Maria, who is screen right in the dark room; a staircase going down is at screen left. And in the very center of the frame—but consigned to the far background, and to shadows—is the picture of José Maria as the proud bandit sitting on his horse, gazing ahead. The question that opens up is, At *whom* is he gazing? The scene ends as José Maria stands up, walks across the frame, and exits down the staircase.

Now, what is interesting about this second shot is the way in which it is constructed as a *lure*—in the Lacanian sense. The odd camera position both highlights the painting and at the same time retroactively justifies itself by the movement of the character across the space, thus effacing the fact that it was the painting that motivated the camera position. The scene goes by and we don't notice the painting; yet we feel that something "isn't quite right here," something is amiss. Only when we go back do we notice the painting, and it thus becomes the element that "sticks out," just like the skull in the Holbein painting analyzed by Lacan. As such, the painting functions as the blot, the stain, the incongruous piece around which circulates the repressed material of the image, the scene, or the dream.[12]

Lacan's theory of the gaze is considerably more complex and difficult than the theory of the gaze that underlies apparatus theory. That is to say, Lacan gives primacy not to the gaze of the eye/camera, but to the gaze of the *picture*, the gaze of the Other.[13] Žižek provides the best examples for understanding the import of this notion. Let's imagine we're in the world of a detective story, at the scene of some crime. Everything in the "picture" presented to us can be taken as a clue to the crime, but of course, we must assume that the criminal has orchestrated the picture precisely so as to give us the effect that nothing is amiss. The detective, within this rebus, must discover the one element that sticks out, that doesn't belong, that retroactively allows us to read the hidden message in the scene.[14] Thus, to take an example from Lacan's own work, Edgar Allan Poe's famous "purloined letter" is just such a blot in the picture: the point is that the letter is displayed for everyone to see, but no one sees it. Only the detective Dupin, by assuming the position of the Other, is able to see that blot in the picture which everyone else sees as seamless.

What is interesting about the scene in *Llanto* is that the stain in the picture is itself a picture. We should first note that the painting is inscribed into one of the film's few scenes which privilege the subjectivity of a character: José Maria is precisely meditating upon his fate, and he is about to decide to betray his former friends and collaborate with the forces of the king. But it's too easy to ascribe a simply ironic function to the painting: in other words, "Look at the once proud bandit about to sell out." To go back to our earlier, unanswered question: What is the gaze of the portrait? Is it not the gaze of the king himself? Once again, the radical "impossibility" inscribed within the figure of the bandit himself is articulated in the text. For as Hobsbawm notes, the bandit is—paradoxically—always ultimately on the side of the Law, the King, God; his quarrel is always with the intermediaries of the Law.[15] As such, he is essentially a conservative figure. And thus, in the scene we are considering, the painting as "stain" points to this repressed impossibility, for there is no way that José Maria could have become "politicized," joined the forces of Republicanism, and still remained a bandit. This impossibility is built into the Symbolic itself. José Maria has nothing to do but play out the scene to his death. It is thus highly significant that the film's final image, a freeze frame, is exactly a debased version of the portrait—José Maria mounted on his horse, but this time slumped over, dead, as a balladeer sings "El Tempranillo es meurto."

The Spain of the early 1960s—that is, of the beginning of the miracle—was marked by the same sense of impossibility. The members of Opus Dei, for example, knew that secularization went hand in hand with economic modernization; yet they continued to believe that because *they* were Catholics, they could somehow defy that inevitability. The government wanted to export the image of a cosmopolitan Spain, while at the same time assuming that the image would never "return to its destination." The economic miracle, in a sense, put everyone in the same impossible situation as the bandit.

Banditi a Orgosolo

De Seta's figuration of the bandit in Italy (and, to be precise, in Sardinia) takes a radically different approach than Saura's, one that could be described as more neorealist than neorealism. The film was shot on location, with nonprofessional actors drawn from the local population, and its plot is inscribed within a documentarylike record of everyday events. And unlike Saura's film (or Rosi's, for that matter), it takes for its central character not a legend-

Banditi a Orgosolo

ary historical bandit but an ordinary shepherd driven by circumstance to become a bandit. It is the story of the making of a bandit, and its larger narrative structure is remarkably similar to that of the classic neorealist film, *Ladri di biciclette* (*Bicycle Thieves*, 1948). There is the same cyclical structure: the impoverished Roman is first the victim of the theft of his bicycle, and finally out of desperation himself becomes a bicycle thief. The question then to be answered is, Why, when faced with the new problems created by modernization, did Italian film-makers take up an older form?

The narrative structure of *Banditi* is simple. We begin with a series of shots of the everyday life of the shepherds around Orgosolo, voiced in what Kinder has called the "iterative" (i.e., the cinematic equivalent of such a typically Proustian phrase as "We would often go to . . . ").[16] As the main character tends his sheep, he notices that a group of bandits has hidden some stolen hogs in a nearby hut. When the police come and question the shepherd, they are ambushed by the bandits, and the shepherd is wrongly implicated in the crimes. He tries to run away, taking his flock with him, since he still hasn't repaid the loan on the sheep. But the animals are driven to exhaustion and die, forcing the shepherd to become a bandit in order to save himself from the bank. The final shot has him driving a flock of stolen sheep across the plain as the victim of the theft "hails" him a bandit.

What the cyclical structure does here is to *naturalize* the process of becoming a bandit: it is as if anyone could become a bandit if put in a certain set of circumstances. Now this may be true, of course; but the crucial point is that even at its formal level, *Banditi* works in a curious way to "contain" the bandit, to mark banditry as just another social problem that the forward march of progress needs to address. So that, just as *Seduced and Abandoned* takes the problems of sexual mores and displaces them onto the South, *Banditi* avoids the issues surrounding modernization by displacing them upon the backward interior of Sardinia. (One need only compare *Banditi* to the Taviani brothers' *Padre padrone* [1977] to see just what is missing in the De Seta film.) We could take this even further and argue that the resurrection of an old form is *itself* the nostalgia inherent to the bandit's

story; the nostalgia that is rigorously repressed from the narrative itself. Thus, here the redeployment of neorealist strategies (and formal structures), while clearly *intending* to resurrect an engagement with the pressing social issues confronting the nation, in fact in its very form represents a "return of the repressed"—a return of the very symptom that marked the limits of the first wave of neorealism (which, in the case of *Ladri*, was the recurrent eruption of melodrama into the text).

To frame this whole issue in terms of the bandit's relation to modernity, what happens in *Banditi* is that the cinematic apparatus itself becomes implicated in the proceedings, on the side of "progress." For the characters and the situations are "real," and the cinematic apparatus becomes part of the very historical processes that will wipe out the bandit. In a sense, then, the film is not sophisticated enough to "lament," to lament what will be *lost* after all the gains of the economic miracle. And this sense of irrevocable loss is precisely what we *do* get in *Padre padrone*.

This problematic was not lost on Pasolini. While he called for a revival of neorealism, in practice this was something quite different from De Seta's work. *Accattone* mingles a rigorously formal neorealism with dream sequences, and again, the enunciation embraces all the characters under the gaze of a homosexual desire. In this way, the *ragazzi di vita*[17] can never be contained the way the bandits of Orgosolo are. Some 15 years after *Accattone*, Pasolini was to write that the *ragazzi* he had loved so passionately had been exterminated by a "cultural genocide."[18] Pasolini was referring here specifically to television as an institution of cultural homogenization; with *Banditi* we see the way the cinema can itself be an (unwitting) participant in that process of homogenization.

Salvatore Giuliano

In *Salvatore Giuliano*, Francesco Rosi also turns to neorealist strategies in telling the story of the Sicilian bandit assassinated in 1950—but, like Pasolini and unlike De Seta, Rosi is concerned with rethinking neorealism for a new generation. Rosi's strategy is to adopt the form of the "film inquest," a strategy articulated by writers like Zavattini in the early 1950s but hitherto rarely employed on film with any success. In 1952, Zavattini argued that neorealism needed to move from an *attitude* toward the phenomenal world to an *analysis* of the world.[19] Ultimately, this was an argument for moving neorealism in a more explicitly political direction, for making the film ask questions about the origins and nature of the "reality" it is recording. With Rosi's *Salvatore Giuliano*, this "film inquest" is brilliantly deployed to unmask the crisscrossing social forces that found their intersection in the legendary Sicilian bandit.

The result is a film that in many ways inverts all the terms of the traditional bandit story. Rosi's film opens with the bandit already dead, his corpse sprawled in a courtyard as an army official dictates the description of the murder scene. The film then flashes back to 1943 and the emergence of the Sicilian independence movement, which was opposed by the Americans, the large landowners, and the Mafia. It shows the army's unsuccessful attempts to subdue Giuliano's band, and ultimately settles on the massacre of Communists at a 1947 rally and the subsequent trial to determine who was responsible. But the figure of the living Salvatore Giuliano is completely repressed from the text; Rosi never shows him except as a corpse. By marginalizing what is supposed to be the central figure, Rosi purges the bandit legend of its inherent nostalgia, thus rendering the figure less the emblem of traditionalist values and more a kind of invisible force field around which swirl the social antagonisms of the country.

Gradually, we learn that the Mafia and the carabinieri are colluding to defeat the radical independence movement (as well as the Communists) and are using the bandits as pawns in this game. Ultimately, it will be this right-wing alliance which will engineer the assassination of Salvatore Giuliano. In a brilliant repetition of the opening overhead shot of the corpse, Rosi shows the conspirators planting the body in the courtyard. This of course radically undermines the opening of the film, where the sound track presented us with an "official" description and inventory of the crime scene that we now see has been completely constructed by the conspirators. And, in a coda set in 1960, Rosi repeats this overhead angle in the last scene of the film. First, in long shot, we see a bustling crowd in a piazza. We hear gunfire, see the crowd scattering, and notice a body falling in the distance. Then comes the cut to the overhead shot—with the position of the body duplicating that of Giuliano—as in the top and right of the screen ominous shadows fall into the frame as "onlookers" gather around the body.[20] This final shot brilliantly evokes the impenetrable conspiracies that lie behind the anonymous murder.

In fact, Rosi's principal formal device is a certain

way of positioning the camera—usually in overhead shots and always at a distance from the action—that subordinates characters to their positions in the natural and social landscape. Panoramic camera shots carefully lay out the relationship between the town, the surrounding hills, and the road that winds through them; and it is as if the landscape becomes a chessboard upon which the various characters are placed. The specificity of character is replaced by the *position* the character occupies; in this way, the characters come to seem almost interchangeable, pawns caught in the movement of much larger historical forces. This is why the "position" of Salvatore Giuliano in this film is so ironic: not only because he is a corpse, but because his corpse itself is "produced" by larger, historical forces.

Rosi's film not only deconstructs the figure of the bandit, but also anticipates some of the more recent work on the nation as discursive construction. For the film clearly shows how the triumphant emergence of "Italy" in the postwar period was based upon the silencing of the voices of others.[21] Rosi's film is more radical than Saura's or De Seta's in that it clearly links the economic miracle to the construction of a certain kind of Italy, one engineered in part by foreign capital, the Mafia, and the Christian Democratic government in Rome.

Global Culture and the Bandit

There is of course a larger context to these economic developments in Spain and Italy: namely, the postwar global reorganization of capital and the emergence of multinational capitalism. This process derives principally from the United States, and thus it seems fitting to end by looking at Peckinpah's magnificent "lament for a bandit": *Pat Garrett and Billy the Kid.*

Much has been written about the recent transformation of capitalism into its third—or late—stage, and about the relationship between this process and the cultural phenomenon of postmodernism. While there is hardly consensus about postmodernism and its implications, there is fairly wide agreement about what characterizes the current organization of capitalism. It is global, and its new systems of production, consumption, and finance render national borders increasingly obsolete. Capitalism increasingly commodifies the image, thus rendering suspect the image's claim to veracity. And it depends upon uneven development, which masks the relations of production to such an extent that exploitative relationships become harder and harder to perceive clearly.[22] From this, Fredric Jameson argues that the principal feature of the multinational capitalist system is the impossibility of seeing or understanding it in its totality. For Jameson, the work of art functions to allegorize these large historical forces and therefore enables us to "see" the world system.[23] If this is so, then perhaps the Peckinpah film can place the bandit film in a larger historical context. For there is a way in which *Pat Garrett* is the "ultimate" bandit film: it inscribes within its text the discourses of the historical inevitability of "progress," and it is haunted by a sense of finality, loss, and death.

Pat Garrett is that great anomaly, the "ex-" bandit, and thus right from the beginning the film confronts the issue of the bandit's untenable position in the social order. Billy the Kid is the "real" bandit, and he is figured as Pat Garrett's double, the figure of his imaginary identification. The West itself is no longer seen as virgin, but instead is inscribed with all of the ruthless forces of a nascent capitalism—an exact reversal of the traditional mythology of the Western. (In this respect, the casting of Slim Pickens and Katy Jurado in small roles is a stroke of genius: they become the textual representatives of that old form, where now the sheriff is an old whore and his wife the "phallic mother.")

By doubling the figure of the bandit, Peckinpah is able to confront head-on the entire issue of the bandit's impossibility—that is, the impossibility itself becomes the principal subject of the film. If the bandit is a figure who must assume his mandate or die, then Garrett becomes one of the "living dead." Billy, in contrast, smiles in the face of the prospect of his death; in the early shootout, he seems to greet every just-missed bullet with a sardonic grin. Billy embodies the film's *jouissance*, and is continually connected with Mexico, the maternal other. The film's narrative line is utterly simple: Garrett pursues his alter ego Billy, finds him, kills him, then aims his gun at his own mirror reflection and shatters it. In psychoanalytic terms, the bandit here is figured as narcissistic, captured by the maternal; and thus Garrett's destruction of his imaginary identification is his final requisite for entry into the Law. What is so interesting here, though, is the way that the film itself sides with pre-Oedipal *jouissance* against the Oedipal entry into the Law, in an exact reversal of the classic Western, which is entirely on the side of the Law.

Pat Garrett and Billy the Kid

This is where the film reflects precisely the movement to global capitalism in the sense that the global consumer culture falls on the side of narcissism as against the Oedipal. Here, it is useful to look at the film as coming out of the decade of the 1960s. It could be argued, for example, that the generational conflict that dominated the 1960s—a conflict that took as its very poles the issues of pleasure vs. duty, *jouissance* vs. the Name-of-the-Father—simply played out the inner logic of the newly emerging economic order, itself dominated by the pleasure principle, consumption, the simulacrum. As Michel Foucault notes, the 1960s was the decade in which it was finally realized that the traditional "disciplinary regimes" of the body were no longer necessary; that in fact the industrial order had no need for such strong controls over the body.[24]

Thus, perhaps the most telling detail in Peckinpah's film is the casting of Bob Dylan. As a character known simply as "Boy," he has absolutely no narrative function in the film. At one point in the film, Pat Garrett has him go into the storeroom and read off the labels of all the canned goods in what becomes a litany of consumption. Otherwise, Boy is

seen as having an adolescent's crush on Billy the Kid. But his presence is decisive on the sound track: all the film's music—generally ballads of lament for Billy the Kid—was composed and performed by Dylan. At this level, the film connects with Saura's *Llanto*; but whereas Saura's film gives us the "real" folk music, Peckinpah gives us a simulacrum. With *Pat Garrett and Billy the Kid*, we can say that we have finally entered into a "new world order," and that the bandit —who was able to provide the Spanish and Italian cinemas of the early 60s with a still vital means for exploring the economic miracle—can finally be laid to rest.

Ultimately, then, what the stylistic analyses of the bandit films of Spain and Italy tell us is that they are marked by a deep problematic. For in resurrecting the figure of the bandit at precisely the moment when international capital was reorganizing the "backward" economies of these nations, the film-makers were forced to examine the ways in which film-making itself was becoming part of the international reorganizing force. To deal with this problem, the directors of Spain and Italy adoped a "last-ditch" modernism in a world moving inexorably into postmodernity.

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Notes

1. For the purposes of my argument, the bandit will be taken to be a man. This is not to say that women bandits did not exist, but simply that their cultural "figuration" was different. Hobsbawm notes that in nineteenth-century Spain there were several women—Toralba, La Marimacho—who became celebrated bandits after having been "dishonoured." This was, of course, a violation of the code of machismo, where the man is supposed to avenge the violation of "his" woman. See Eric J. Hobsbawm, *Bandits* (New York: Pantheon, 1981), p. 136.
2. Ibid., p. 36.
3. Ibid., p. 19.
4. John Hooper, *The Spaniards: A Portrait of the New Spain* (New York: Penguin, 1987), pp. 25-34.
5. Ibid., pp. 27-28.
6. Ibid., p. 29.
7. Antonio Gramsci, *Prison Notebooks* (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1971), pp. 157-58.
8. Hobsbawm, p. 23.
9. Martin Clark, *Modern Italy, 1871–1982*, Longman History of Italy, vol. 7 (New York: Longman, 1984), p. 369.
10. For an extended discussion of how neorealism was apporpriated by Spanish directors, see Marsha Kinder, *Blood Cinema: The Reconstruction of National Identity in Spain* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1993), chapter 1. For a discussion specifically of *Los Golfos*, see Kinder, pp. 90–111, and Marvin D'Lugo, *The Films of Carlos Saura: The Practice of Seeing* (Princeton, N. J.: Princeton University Press, 1991), pp. 29–45.
11. See D'Lugo, pp.30-42, 45-54, and Kinder, pp. 155–65.
12. See Jacques Lacan, *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: Norton, 1978), chapters 6, 9.
13. See the famous "sardine can" story. Here the point is that the vantage point of the sardine can creates a stain in the picture, which precisely expresses the repressed content of the scene: namely that the young Lacan did not belong in the "picture." Thus, the subject (Lacan) "fades" under the gaze of the Other. Lacan, pp. 95-96.
14. Slavoj Žižek, *Looking Awry: An Introduction to Jacques Lacan through Popular Culture* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1992), pp. 48-54.
15. Hobsbawm, p. 53.
16. Marsha Kinder, "Subversive Potential of the Pseudo-Iterative," *Film Quarterly*, vol. 43, no. 2 (Winter 1989–90), pp. 2–16.
17. Literally, "boys of life"—the street boys who were the subject of Pasolini's early films (as well as of his early novels).
18. Pier Paolo Pasolini, "Il mio *Accattone* in tv dopo il genocidio," in *Lettere luterane* (Torino: Einaudi, 1976), pp. 152-64.
19. Cesare Zavattini, "A Thesis on Neorealism," in *Springtime in Italy: A Reader on Neorealism*, ed. David Overbey (Hamden, CT: Archon Books, 1979).
20. P. Adams Sitney suggests that this last victim could be the unnamed Mafia liaison in the plot to assassinate Giuliano. This, however, is certainly not clear from the text of the film, as Sitney himself later notes: "the shot deliberately hedges a clear identification." And in fact, for Rosi to have provided such a clear identification at the end would have suggested a kind of closure that is clearly in aesthetic conflict with the "openness" of the film's narrative. See P. Adams Sitney, *Vital Crises in Italian Cinema: Iconography, Stylistics, Politics* (Austin: TX: University of Texas Press, 1995), pp. 203–05.
21. See, for example, Homi K. Bhabha, "DissemiNation," in *Nation and Narration*, ed. Homi Bhabha (New York: Verso, 1993).
22. The literature on the subject is vast. See, for example, David Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1989), and Edward Soja, *Postmodern Geographies* (New York: Verso, 1993).
23. Fredric Jameson, "Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism," *New Left Review* 46 (July/Aug. 1984), p. 87.
24. Michel Foucault, *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings, 1972-1977*, ed. Colin Gordon, trans. C. Gordon et al. (New York: Pantheon, 1980), p. 85.

Reviews

Kids

Director: Larry Clark. Producer: Cary Woods. Screenplay: Harmony Korine. Cinematographer: Eric Alan Edwards. Music: Louis Barlow. Excalibur Films.

Larry Clark's *Kids* opens with a bang. Splayed out on a flowered bedspread are two adolescents—he looking like Huckleberry Finn, she like a pre-Raphaelite angel—locked in one of those endless, sucking French kisses that only teenagers can perform, awkwardly expressing their desires within the bounds of precoital sex. An uncomfortable duplicity is established: the camera captures a vision of innocence slipping toward a blissful fall, but the familiar elements of soft lighting and romantic music are eerily absent, making everything *too* raw, too "real." More cold and harsh than warm and wet, the kiss is finally broken and they speak, betraying themselves as distinctly nonprofessional actors. "You know what I want to do?" the boy asks bluntly. "Yeah . . . you want to fuck me," the girl answers matter-of-factly. She can't be more than 13, a fact reinforced by the battery of teddy bears looking on. The scene offers a painfully transgressive voyeurism; shock, embarrassment, and the absolute need to see more are mixed in equal measure.

These two are definitely not Molly Ringwald and Anthony Michael Hall, but, at the same time, they don't have the decadent glamour of Warhol's "kids"; the distances provided by both "entertainment" and "art" films seem to be lost. The camera does cut away from the young bodies before they actually fuck; rather, the audience sees the effect of the action on these two: a close-up of the boy's face shows an utter lack of sensitivity as he savagely pounds into the young girl; her face is a mixture of agony and resignation as she receives him. It's not gentle or pretty; in a voice-over the boy, Telly, waxes: "Virgins. I love 'em. No diseases, no loose-as-a-goose pussy, no skank. No nothin. Just pure pleasure." Cut to

Kids on the street

black, hit the music, hard, roll credits. It's clear what *Kids* is all about.

Nothing like this has ever been put on screen before. With this opening sequence, Larry Clark assaults our cinematic sensibilities, just as Luis Buñuel did in 1928 by slitting a woman's eyeball: both directors open our eyes to new realities. What are we looking at? Why are we watching? What can't be shown? What shouldn't be shown? These questions are given new urgency by the film's opening. As *Kids* progresses, its raw, pseudo-documentary style allows the events to unfold "naturally," which makes them all the more believable and disturbing.

"I don't want no baby," says the girl from the opening scene, clearly aware of one risk of sex; but it's a risk she will overlook with Telly's (Leo Fitzpatrick) empty promises that it won't happen and that he cares for her. Of course, the audience wonders why she still doesn't make him wear a condom; her vulnerability to him is as frightening as her seeming ignorance of AIDS. The callowness of Telly's seduction underscores its reality—how many girls give it up to a player like this every day? An equally disturbing prospect for the audience is that this very vulnerability is what makes her, and him, so appealing. Despite the many unattractive elements in Telly's character, he is a *kid*, and his quest for virginity is a child's game that resonates much deeper, broader needs. And the very fact that these two kids are so unglamorous serves to enhance their authenticity and, paradoxically, renders them more attractive to an audience jaded by hollow movie fantasies.

Telly comes out of the bedroom triumphant and cocky, so cocky that he spits on the expensive oriental rug in the dining room. He meets Caspar, his best friend (Justin Pierce), and immediately begins to brag about his conquest, revealing his obsession with virgins as a goal, a profession, the only thing meaningful in his life: "Was'up bitch? . . . You fucked it? . . . that girl was like twelve and you hit it up! . . . Who am I? The motha fuckin' virgin surgeon!" Full of attitude, these boys dress, walk, and talk with the hiphop style that signifies street authenticity, but a visit to Telly's house reveals he's a lower-middle-class kid with two parents at home. The film cuts across class and race lines, pointing to issues that affect many different "types" of kids.

At the core of *Kids'* power is its shockingly accomplished cinéma-vérité look that in some ways recalls the roughness of another teen film almost equal in power, Jonathan Kaplan's *Over the Edge*. "The reason why I like that movie," said Larry Clark, "was that they used kids the right age, they actually used kids. Real kids. I knew my film had to be from the inside. . . . I think when you see *Kids* that most of us—not all of us, but most of us—will say 'Yeah, that's the way we were, that's the way kids are.'" (*Artforum*, May 1995.)

The camera rests on the faces of *Kids*' "real" teens, probing, revealing, betraying all that is beautiful, ugly, attractive, repulsive, alluring, and repugnant. That the gaze is adult, that it is male, that it is often unmistakably erotic/homoerotic makes it all the more disturbing. Despite the fact that many of the girls are more conventionally attractive, the camera remains fascinated by the boys and their homosocial bonding. In a crucial sequence, we watch the closeness and physicality among the skaters in Washington Square Park as Telly and Casper greet their friends, hugging, slapping five, enjoying deep affection. Tales are told and marijuana is shared in a ritual "spleef twistin'." In her book *Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire*, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick points out that " . . . 'male bonding' . . . may, as in our society, be characterized by intense homophobia, fear and hatred of homosexuality" (1-2). Proving Sedgwick's concept of the homosocial, the skaters are repelled by an interracial gay couple who walk past. But the skaters are also an interracial group—it's the open display of the couple's homosexuality that disturbs these young boys. It's as if they're trying to deny what's at the heart of their subculture. At the end of the film, when Casper rapes the passed-out Jennie (Chloe Sevigny), his desire is fueled by the fact that his best friend has just had sex with another virgin; having sex with Jennie is as close as he can come to having sex with Telly. Homosociality can never consciously become homosexuality.

As much as the film disturbs us with images of young girls acquiescing to Telly, we also see these girls talking with a rare and brutal honesty and sense of humor about sex and even pushing boys away—not because they don't like sex or don't trust boys (in fact, it's fascinating how these girls seem to accept these boys for what they are), but because it's not what they want or when they want it. It's unusual for a film to show not only females, but young females openly explaining how much they prefer foreplay to sex, or at the same time how they love "hard-core fuck pounding!" The film that demystifies teenage sexuality allows female desire a voice that's rarely heard in American cinema. The girls unabashedly express their love of pleasure, appreciating and extolling the talents of boys who have "magic fingers" and complaining when the sex it leads up to is anticlimactic: "It either takes them too long or too short to come." The scene of the girls discussing sex is intercut with Telly and Casper arguing with six other boys about what girls want. The boys claim that girls do indeed "love to give head . . . they just act like they don't in front of their friends." Cut to the girls exclaiming, "I hate sucking dick . . . it takes so long and you're fucking gagging . . . and you're not getting anything out of it." The girls come out of this sequence seeming much more

Kids' Darcy (Yakira Peguero) and Telly (Leo Fitzpatrick)

sophisticated, sensitive, interesting, and complex than the boys, whose sexuality is animal and competitive, graceless, even primitive.

This open discussion of sexuality removes the film from the conventions of the teen melodrama genre, where sex is usually the central conflict and any broader social ramifications of a repressive society are glossed over by the "family romance," which asks us to believe that if the romantic problems are solved then true resolution is achieved. Clark also subverts Hollywood melodrama by playing with one of its classic devices, the crosscutting of two narrative strands destined to meet in climax and resolution. Two narratives are indeed crosscut in *Kids*: Jennie attempts to find Telly after she learns that he has infected her with the AIDS virus and Telly heads towards the seduction of another virgin, Darcy (Yakira Peguero). We expect these two strands to intersect at a moment of "truth," providing us with a dramatic payoff; we wonder if Jennie will "save" Darcy. But that's not what she's trying to do. The fact is, she doesn't know what to do. In a direct attack on the simplistic morality of melodrama, Clark uses his pseudo-documentary style to hollow out the audience's expectations.

This tension plays off another traditional narrative trajectory, the romantic unification of the couple. The strands again intersect, but once more the dramatic payoff is denied. When Jennie finds Telly, he's already deflowering Darcy, and she can only stand there and stare, completely lost. There is no resolution, no closure; nor is the couple united, except possibly in having AIDS. With devastating irony, Jennie passes out and is then raped by Casper, with the AIDS virus possibly being passed on to yet another person. Yet we'll never know what Jennie feels or thinks as she sees Telly with Darcy—jealousy, disgust, despair? Similarly, we'll never know whether Darcy or Casper got infected. Does it make a difference? Is that what the film is about? Although *Kids* may not be about *all* kids, it's not just about *these* kids. Dismay and disgust is exactly the reaction of most adults to this fact, which is one of the reasons these kids are the way they are.

Adults are out of touch and also out of sight in *Kids*. When they do appear, they are worn out, beaten down, hardened by life—and by these teens who refuse to be disciplined or follow warnings. Most adults in the film are ignored, mocked, or lied to; Telly's mom asks him if he'll be home before 4 A.M. for once, while explaining how she can't give him money because she's broke (she's lying because she does have money that Telly then steals); the free-clinic nurses must deal with 16-year-old girls who've had unprotected sex and are dying on them; the Korean clerk from the corner market is ripped off. The exceptions are adults from the street: a drug dealer, a street musician, and a legless beggar. In a sequence that

obliquely refers to another unrelenting look at kids—Luis Buñuel's *Los Olvidados*—where the kids throw a legless beggar off his cart, Casper gives the beggar money. It's one moment of compassion for a character who will brutally crack a kneeling man across the face with a skateboard, then later rape the unconscious Jenny. This sequence adds complexity to the characterizations of Casper and Telly and shows us the world in which they live, a world that also includes a mother who breast-feeds while smoking a cigarette, and a cab driver who offers Jenny his view on how a young girl should look at life: "Whatever it is, just forget about it. Life's too short. Make yourself happy."

The film ends with Casper waking up out of a alcohol/drug stupor and saying "Jesus Christ, what happened?" Earlier in the evening, one of the younger boys admires a gold crucifix, insisting that he believes in Jesus. But when Casper invokes the name it's only a exclamation of surprise and loss; there's no salvation offered by the film. His question is addressed to the audience, who must grapple with the issues the film raises. Whatever salvation the kids achieve can only come through their own efforts—they have replaced religion with skateboarding, deflowering virgins, smoking dope, and drinking malt liquor. God belongs to the adult world, not theirs. Telly gets the last word as he tells us of his need for virgins, because that's all he's got in this world: "When you're young, not much matters. When you find something that you care about, then that's all you got. When you go to sleep at night, you dream of pussy. When you wake up, it's the same thing. It's there in your face, in your dreams, you can't escape it. Sometimes when you're young the only place to go is inside. That's just it. Fucking is what I love. Take that away from me, and I really got nothin."

With nowhere to run, nowhere to hide, these kids take what they can get because, as Casper bluntly says, they may be sick but "that's how I'm livin. . . . " Whatever these kids use, they it use to fill a void in their lives; the world of adults is another planet, one the kids visit only when they have to. "I don't know no *kid* who's got no AIDS," says one boy to Telly (again in patently unmelodramatic fashion), indicating that the disease is seen only as another adult scare tactic, like those against rap music and wearing your baseball cap backwards.

Kids attempts to deromanticize its subjects through its nonconventional elements: the jarring visual style, the nonprofessional actors, the raw perspectives on sex and violence, and the nonsensationalized pleasure taken in the presentation of spectacle. Yet the more it strips away melodramatic conventions, the more we see how compelling and even attractive its subjects are. That's the uncanny quality of teens: not innocent children, not corrupted adults, but somehow in a magic nether world, fighting to stay free from an inevitable fall. "When you grow up, your heart dies," says Ally Sheedy in *The Breakfast Club*; the line may not seem true to adults now, but did it back when they were young? The brilliance of *Kids* lies in the fact that it is presented to us without the overt moralizing of a John Hughes film.

One of the film's most fascinating aspects is the range of reactions it provokes—anger, disgust, and denial seem to come in slightly ahead of resignation, respect, and even pleasure and acclaim. For adults to recognize that they can see where these kids are coming from, or even that these types of kids exist, would somehow validate the kids' actions; worse, they may have found the kids, and their behavior, just as attractive as repulsive. What may be most troubling is that the film's message *isn't* nihilistic: *Kids* is one of the most exuberant cautionary tales ever. The beauty, the life, the hope of the film is in its aesthetic reverence for its subjects. The real-life drama of sex, drugs, and violence, presented in all its pathetic beauty, leaves many wondering why these kids just don't get it. Yet maybe we're the ones who don't get it.

JESSE ENGDAHL & JIM HOSNEY

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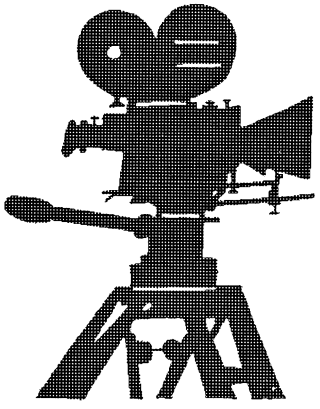


Crumb

Director: Terry Zwigoff. Producers: Lynn O'Donnell and Terry Zwigoff. Cinematographer: Maryse Alberti. Music: David Boeddinghaus. Sony Pictures Classics.

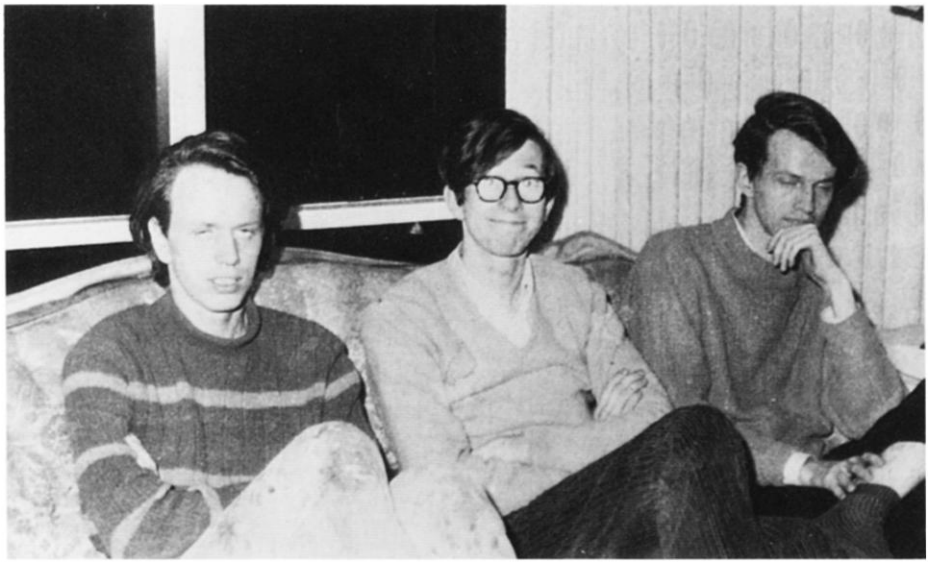
The beauty of Terry Zwigoff's bleak and cathartic documentary is the wonderful evanescence of its "message." Zwigoff's reasoned investigation of countercultural comic-book artist Robert Crumb allows the viewer to dismiss, valorize, or make something in-between of his subject's life and work. Filtering issues of fame, sexism, family, and censorship through the spectator's natural identification with the film's subject, *Crumb* forces us—through that identification—to question our own political and moral views. Having risen to prominence in the anti-authoritarian Berkeley of the 1960s and reevaluated by the often dictatorial phenomenon of political correctness, Robert Crumb becomes a theoretical barometer who tests our ideas of artistic responsibility and license.

Though his film is structured in the tradition of biographical films of the famous or notable, Zwigoff's project often yields greater, more trenchant insights at its periphery: about the 1950s family, cultural alienation, and our belief in the redemptive nature of fame. Crumb and his comic-book fame often become incidental, a mere ordering device for Zwigoff's larger, more complex project of investigating the Crumb family: older brother Charles, a medicated, suicidal recluse cocooned in his mother's Philadelphia home since his youth; and Maxon, a self-punishing former molester holed up in a dank skid row hotel where jars of peanut butter and yams share quarters with his bed of nails.

Crumb is steeped in a rich subtext that expands its mission from simple biography to include every one of us as it investigates the universal plight of childhood and how the complex relationships and experiences brewed there create the adult. The strong, fecund, female bodies of Robert's drawings again and again dwarf the artist in a replay of childhood powerlessness. At some moments his artwork seems to represent the purgative aspect of creativity; at others, however, it suggests a stymied sense that his comics may not vent, but *fuel* unpleasant or unresolved desires.

Critics have tended to focus on Robert's triumph over the sexual and psychological quagmire of his childhood (assuming Maxon and Charles to be casualties), but *Crumb* shows that this apparent success story was not without its hidden costs. By the film's conclusion, Robert's flight to France in 1993 completes a trajectory of escape that feels anything but climactic and transcendent.

Hero and anti-hero both, Robert lures us in with his critical eye and justified disgust for the world, then dares us to identify fully with his battery-acid misanthropy. Robert presents no one definable personality; he is frustratingly conflicted and nuanced, a stew of self-loathing, chest-beating egotism, hatred, despondency, and fear. One of a battery of experts and laypeople offering opinions on the artist is former *Mother Jones* editor Deirdre English, who asserts that his drawings' "arrested juvenile vision" of the world—and especially of women—



The brothers Crumb: (from left) Maxon, Robert, and Charles

A happy moment for Robert Crumb

reveals a sense of powerlessness instilled by an abusive father and social rejection during childhood.

If one of the more disturbing aspects of *Crumb* is Robert's unapologetic Weltanschauung—"I have these hostilities to women, I admit it" (save his "darling daughter Sophie," who wipes away his kiss with casual disdain)—the most liberating, pleasurable aspect is Robert's venomous tirades against a manufactured, advertised life. The voice of dissent is not the crusading advocate of displaced labor in Michael Moore's *Roger & Me* or *Hoop Dream*'s underprivileged African Americans pining for a piece of the American pie. Instead, *Crumb* is an all-encompassing, overwhelmingly bitter rejection of the shiny lies and sordid promises of our culture via, in John Powers' words, Crumb's role as a "nerd Messiah." A valentine to the terminal outsider, Crumb introduces passive, masochistic rebels (in the reclusive Maxon and Charles and their misanthropic brother) who fly in the face of a popular imagination built on the brutal sexual rebellion of Brando or Dean or Kerouac. Rebellion here is not an enviable stance or fashionable pose, but a bruised life-long affliction that attests to the playground brutality of our society.

On an intrinsic level, *Crumb* rejects culture as defined by Hollywood: the *Rocky* myth that we succeed through what we overcome and that there is an ultimate reward for endurance. The film shows the inescapable, deeply impacted nature of the Crumb brothers' hemlock-laced childhood which is not conquered, but merely momentarily exorcised in Robert's panels or Charles' scathing soliloquies. What *Crumb* illustrates is the continual process of a phrase Robert penned in his childhood diary: "I decided to reject conforming when society rejected me."

R. Crumb's mordant, satirical art is translated by Zwigoff into storyboard scrolls of San Francisco's seedy Mission district and the eclectic clutter of Robert's California bungalow, deconstructed by the ironic, sandpaper-abrasive presence of Robert or Charles. Zwigoff retains the spirit of underground comics like *Zap* and *Weirdo* by foregrounding their autobiographical hellfire; the farrago of self-loathing and social criticism which defines the genre is translated from the comic panel to film.

Zwigoff's cynical editing captures the dour mood of the underground comic as it penetrates the central mystification of the American family as a protective, nurturing shelter from the world. By juxtaposing the richly saturated archival footage of the "ideal" 1950s home life with the Crumb brothers' own grubby, sepia-tinted remembrances of life with father, the "overbearing tyrant," the film-maker exposes the profound discrepancy be-

tween the fact of the Crumb home life and the television fiction as the seed of the brothers' mistrust and malaise.

"I'm sort of shocked at this whole buildup in the press of how crazy this family is. You know, 'the craziest, most dysfunctional family in America' type of thing," says Zwigoff. "I never thought of them that way. My own family is every bit as weird, they're just not as interesting."

Though Zwigoff may be underplaying the definite peculiarities of the Crumb family—the medicated, cottony slur of Beatrice Crumb, her body melding with the couch beneath her, the smothering, entombing blankets and quilts she drapes on the walls; the fleshy, obsessive "wrinkles" of Charles' drawing style; the contorted, threatening female bodies in Robert and Maxon's work—his point is evident. In reading the Crumbs as some kind of entertaining perversion of family life or freak show anomaly, we fail to see the commonality we might have with them: the harsh, affection-withholding father (a legacy of emotional distance that, *Crumb* suggests, Robert is continuing with his own son); a mother in denial, soothing her children against the paternal maelstrom; and children unable to meet their father's expectations.

In giving a voice to two of the family's more marginal members (Maxon and Charles), the film enriches our often cinematically truncated visions of society. While Zwigoff chose the title *Crumb* to acknowledge all three brothers, critical reviews of the film have tended to dismiss or patronize Maxon and Charles as "characters" in the cruelest sense, as mere set pieces to the central drama of The Famous Crumb. At least one critic has gone so far as to label Zwigoff's use of the "secondary" brothers "exploitive," an ironic remarginalization of men already ground into dust by the remorseless machinery of high school. "Try to imagine Terry Zwigoff's film without R. Crumb's thoroughly loony brothers," said Gary Dauphin, writing in the *Village Voice*. "Now ask yourself what consent might mean given their own mental states and relationship to their famous, always autobiographical brother."

Dauphin's preposterous infantilization of Charles and Maxon as being without the agency (or celebrity) necessary to give their consent to be interviewed on film plays again into the critical centrifuge that separates Robert, as the brother made good, from the "failed" brothers. In making *Crumb*, Zwigoff strove to avoid what he saw as the anthropological curiosity value of films like *Grey Gardens* (which the director recalls walking out on). The director establishes a rare intimacy with his intelligent, introspective subjects that invites collusion with Charles' or Maxon's perspective.

Part of *Crumb*'s power is its contention that fame and art may not be the simplistic "escape" our myth of success assumes. While critics can identify with Robert's rage and may not question the misogyny or racism of his vision, it seems to have been a greater stretch to extend that identification to characters without the gloss of success and money to validate their self- and society-loathing, so much so that *Sight and Sound*'s Michael Eaton can express "almost a relief to discover that [Charles] committed suicide after the film was shot." In the same issue Jonathan Romney claims that "it's easy to forget that we're marveling at real people with real problems."

If anyone is exploited by *Crumb* it's the audience member and critic who—even amidst increasing revisionism of the form—believes in documentary as unvarnished truth. Zwigoff is brutally frank about the degree of manipulation film-makers engage in to arrive at the "truth"—the editing, marketing, and aesthetic choices that are heavily modulated by the subjectivity of the director and by the demands of the narrative. The director defies the reputed "objectivity" of the documentary, compromised from the outset by his 25-year friendship with Robert. He makes no secret of his manipulations, as with the marketing of the film and the "certain commercial concessions" made in the provocative poster design of a nubile blonde flashing her panties. Fully conscious of certain effects he wanted to create in the viewer, the film-maker has described his placement of Robert sketching on the street in front of a billboard of a winsome young woman as "ironic"—for its contrast of an emotional effusiveness and feminine ideal next to the impervious, introspective Robert. Zwigoff also admits to using discontinuous reaction shots from one part of the film inserted into another. Such tampering counters at every turn the notion of distanced observation and objectivity proffered by forefathers of the genre like Frederick Wiseman, which Zwigoff dismisses as "bullshit."

"Everytime you choose even what to include, or what to film or what music to put in, any of those decisions has an incredible amount of weight to it."

Just as Robert is something of a revision of the heroic, transcendent artist we expect in our biographies, and just as his brothers dispute our perception of the outsider, the brilliance of Zwigoff's film lies in its challenge to and contestation of our notions of what documentary is capable of revealing.

FELICIA FEASTER

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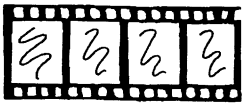

Correspondence & Controversy

Occasionally, an article in Film Quarterly *will arouse particular interest in some readers. That's what happened recently with Judith Sanders and Daniel Lieberfeld's piece on Buster Keaton ("Dreaming in Pictures: The Childhood Origins of Buster Keaton's Creativity," in* FQ *vol. 47, no. 4). Patricia Eliot Tobias, editor of* The Keaton Chronicle *in Hoboken, New Jersey, and a number of co-signatories sent us a letter expressing strong disagreement with Sanders and Lieberfeld's approach. In the year of the 100th anniversary of Keaton's birth, when a number of new books are being published about him, it seems appropriate for us to publish this letter together with Sanders and Lieberfeld's response. We strongly encourage letters from our readers, and we always consider them for publication.*

A.M.

A Letter from *The Keaton Chronicle*

We were dismayed by the inadequate scholarship displayed in Judith Sanders and Daniel Lieberfeld's article about Buster Keaton (*FQ*, Summer 1994). There's so much wrong here, it would take a whole issue of *Film Quarterly* to detail all the flaws. Nearly every paragraph contains an error or misconception. Not only are most of the quotations selectively incomplete, mistakenly attributed, or historically misplaced, but the authors have theorized ahead of their data. In science, this is considered a sin.

For example, here is Sanders and Lieberfeld's inaccurate attribution of a quotation to Keaton's widow, Eleanor: "According to his third wife, Keaton harbored 'depths of sadness . . . that love would never reach again.' (Blesh, 348)." The quote actually belongs to biographer Rudi Blesh (*Keaton* [New York: Macmillan, 1966]), not Eleanor Keaton. Mrs. Keaton and others who knew Buster well repeatedly state that he was a happy and contented man; Mrs. Keaton commented recently, "I don't think he thought sad. He might have looked that way, but he didn't think that way."[1]

The article is fraught with loaded phrases, based solely on the authors' interpretation, with psychological terminology thrown in for good measure: "how frightened he felt," "filled Buster with guilt and fear of reprisal," "candid photographs, in which Buster's handsome face is caught in sullen misery, confirm this view,"[2] "was actually his means of indicating his interior reality," "his evaluation seems to bury his personal unhappiness," "he seems neither to have contested Schenck's decision to dissolve his studio nor to have tried to resolve his differences with Natalie,"[3] "his predisposition toward depression and self-destruction was triggered by the loss of film-making,"[4] "wishful recasting of these traumatic experiences," "creator of this film takes revenge on the emasculating father," etc., etc., etc. The entire piece is filled with personal opinions like these. Opinions are not facts.

For example, on page 16: "The Three Keatons thereafter featured Joe and Buster's slapstick improvisations on the emotionally charged theme of a naughty boy and his enraged father. As Joe lectured the audience on the importance of 'making children mind,' Buster would knock off his father's hat with a basketball. Joe had to teach the bad boy a lesson."

The phrases "emotionally charged theme," "enraged father," and "bad boy" immediately set up connotations that Sanders and Lieberfeld wish to plant in readers' minds. Why is this theme so "emotionally charged"? Why was Joe an "enraged father" or Buster a "bad boy"? Why did Joe *have* to teach Buster a lesson? These things are so only because Sanders and Lieberfeld want you to think they are.

According to the most reliable sources, the family act actually consisted of Joe lecturing to the audience on "How to Bring Up Your Children"—which is substantially different from the authors' "making children

mind." As he conducted this supposedly serious talk, Buster would wreak havoc behind him, eventually causing Joe to notice and react. There is no indication that Buster's character was purposely "naughty" or "bad," or that Joe was an unjustifiably "enraged father"—merely that he ultimately would have to respond to Buster's antics because they were distrupting his talk. Much of the humor came from the contrast between Joe's topic and Buster's behavior.

Here's a typical misinterpretation: "The family worked briefly in England, where audiences were shocked by the act's violence. An English theater owner declared that Buster must have been adopted, because no father would treat his own flesh and blood the way Joe treated Buster."

Not only do the authors overstate what happened, they leave out the fact that the act was a hit in England. The only primary source material extant is Joe Keaton's own self-deprecating article, "Mr. Butt and Co." (*Variety*, May 1909). In Joe's story, the trip was full of droll misunderstandings and odd predicaments. According to Rudi Blesh, British audiences were initially unprepared for the act's rowdiness, but once a few modifications were made, they "closed the week in a storm of cheers and laughter."

Alfred Butt, an internationally known English theater owner, gave the story its punch line. In Joe's words: "Butt said: 'I shall ask you. Is that your own son or an adopted one?' I told him Buster was my own son. 'My word,' said Butt, 'I imagined he was an adopted boy and you didn't give a damn what you did to him.' The same day I purchased three tickets for the first boat sailing." Joe was so upset by Butt's insinuation, he returned the family immediately to New York, cancelling the rest of a potentially lucrative tour.

Sanders and Lieberfeld mention that occasionally Buster was injured performing the family act—considered the roughest in vaudeville. Careful research indicates only two onstage accidents. Yet the authors suggest that these two are representative of more frequent injuries[5] and are evidence of some horrible aspect to his childhood.

Because the Keatons were violating the child labor laws, Buster was often examined by police and physicians. "Once they took me to the mayor of New York City," Keaton said, "into his private office, with the city physicians here in New York, and they stripped me to examine me for broken bones and bruises. Finding none, the mayor gave me permission to work. The next time it happened, the following year, they sent me to Albany, to the governor of the state."[6] Family members, childhood friends, and fellow vaudevillians confirm Buster's recollections.

Most children break at least one bone or are hospitalized at one time or another. The Keatons performed almost year-round, gave two and sometimes three shows a day, seven days a week, for 17 years.[7] Statistically, the injury rate averages between .001 and .02 percent. Considering the nature of the act and the number of times it was performed, two accidents is a small number.

Such misrepresentations are densely strewn throughout the article. Even details one could learn through simple legwork are wrong. Eleanor Keaton was a dancer, not an actress. Buster was 5'6", not 5'4".

Worse is Sanders and Lieberfeld's demonstrated lack of knowledge of *The General*, one of the classics of American film and Keaton's masterpiece. They wrote, "Johnnie Gray also struggles with phallic objects that he cannot quite master, especially the recalcitrant locomotive." The psychological implications are so silly they're not worth commenting on. As for Johnnie's inability to "master" the "recalcitrant locomotive," Sanders and Lieberfeld should watch the film sometime. From beginning to end of *The General*, Johnnie completely controls *two* trains, which at no time are recalcitrant (disobedient or unmanageable). Keaton plays a superbly competent professional who, because of his skill as an engineer, is refused a commission in the army at the beginning of the film. And his mastery enables him to save both his train and his girl.

A bigger difficulty overlies all Sanders and Lieberfeld's other errors. They unload their pet theory onto Keaton's work without any regard for comedy traditions, comic films of the time, Keaton's theatrical history, or his personality. What they spend the second half of the article saying—that Keaton repressed his resentment against an abusive father and that his resentment is reflected in the content of his films—is untenable.

Sanders and Lieberfeld suggest that the size difference between Buster and many of his villains is an expression of this supposed repressed anger. Obviously the authors never watched films by any of Keaton's contemporaries. If they had, they would have noticed one of the basic comic and dramatic traditions. Small comics or heroes are often matched up with large and imposing villains. The size contrast is funny and gives the hero immediate sympathy. Then when the hero triumphs (usually by beating up the large villain), the audience's

reaction is stronger, because the little guy, the underdog, has won.

The big villain/little hero tradition was used in film, theater, and literature long before Buster Keaton came along. Chaplin, Langdon, Lloyd, Laurel and Hardy, Dickens, and Twain—to name just a few—employed it. And one thing that can never be said about Charlie Chaplin is that he used great big villains to work out resentment toward an abusive father.

Moreover, Sanders and Lieberfeld can't even keep their untenable premise straight. On page 21, they say, ". . . Keaton frequently cast Joe in the role of a disparaging, punitive father or father-in-law, notably in the shorts *The Scarecrow*, *Neighbors*, and *Daydreams*, and in the feature *Sherlock, Jr.*" On page 22, they mention *Sherlock, Jr.* again, this time with the opposite conclusion: "The ending is particularly poignant given that Keaton's real father plays the forgiving father in the film." Sorry. It won't work both ways.

In addition, if the authors had finished the research they started on the Keatons' vaudeville act, they would have noticed that Buster often got the better of his father, both physically and psychologically. What would Freud have to say about a father who concocted an act in which his son beats him up two or three times a day?

A little more research would also have shown Sanders and Lieberfeld that some of Joe's performances in Buster's films are simple reconstructions of parts of the vaudeville act. How could anyone conclude that Buster was acting out resentments against his father when he was recreating bits that Joe made up himself?

Among us, we have read nearly everything printed about Keaton, from childhood interviews and reviews, through English, French, Italian, and German books and articles, pieces written shortly before his death, and the many publications since. We knew him, lived with him, or have interviewed his friends, family members, and co-workers. No hint of resentment—with the exception of a very few comments about the breakup of the family act in 1917—has ever surfaced. There is absolutely no indication he ever had such feelings, repressed or otherwise.

Keaton had childhood traumas, just like the rest of us, but he liked most people and was sanguine about most of what happened to and around him. To their discredit, Sanders and Lieberfeld ignore or dismiss Keaton's own opinions[8] and those of close friends, family, and co-workers. Instead of applying good scholarship, the authors choose to tamper with history, ignore legitimate evidence, and put words in people's mouths.

The truth is that these authors (neither of whom has a psychology degree) have created a little fiction for themselves and found a few partial quotes to back them up; they've avoided anything that didn't fit their theory. They have done an injustice to a great artist and to future fans of Keaton's work. We sincerely hope their article does not become the basis for further study. It would be a disgrace if it were ever referred to as if any of it were true.

The tragedy is that the authors neglect two vital pieces of information about Keaton's work. First, he was creating fiction. Second, he was making comedy. His goal was always to tell a story that would involve people and make them laugh.

It's a shame so much space was allotted this article when there is plenty of research left to be done about Keaton, one of the foremost American film-makers of the twentieth century. What's especially sad is that these people have written about one of the century's greatest humorists without seeming to understand his humor.

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University of Arkansas

Ed Watz
Author, *Buster Keaton's Sound Films, 1929-1941*

Notes

1. Interview in Iola, Kansas, at the Second Annual Buster Keaton Celebration, September 24, 1994.
2. Although Keaton's public persona was serious, many candid photographs show him smiling and laughing. Friends, family, co-workers, and journalists have often noted that he laughed easily in private life.
3. In fact, Buster and Natalie took a three-month trip to Europe in 1930 to work out their marital problems, but they were unable to resolve their differences. (Blesh, 315–16; Tom Dardis, *Keaton: The Man Who Wouldn't Lie Down* [New York: Penguin, 1979], p. 196.)
4. According to those who knew him, Keaton did not have a "predisposition toward depression," nor was he "self-destructive." The years 1932–35, however, were stressful. He was divorced by Natalie Talmadge; his best friend Roscoe Arbuckle died suddenly; he had to declare bankruptcy and was sued by the I.R.S. for back taxes; he illegally married his second wife before his divorce was final; and he accidentally got mixed up in a wife-swapping scandal. He lost his home, his wife, his children, his best friend, his money, and his reputation. All this is in addition to the loss of creative control that led to his being fired by MGM when he refused to work on inferior films.
5. "Although Buster became an adept tumbler who took most falls in stride, *there were many accidents.*"
6. Buster Keaton Interview. Oral History Research Project, conducted by Robert and Joan Franklin, for Columbia University. November 1958.
7. A minimum of 10,000 performances and possibly as many as 20,000.
8. "Yet he continued to idealize his father and deny the harm he had caused" (page 15); "The passage reads like Keaton's attempt to convince someone—perhaps himself—that his had been a happy life" (page 20).

A Response from Judith Sanders and Daniel Lieberfeld

First let's consider the factual issues that Tobias et al. raise, and then proceed to the merits of our differing interpretations.

The biographical data in our article are well documented and we cite our sources throughout. The statements that Tobias et al. call into question are readily verifiable by referring to the two principal English-language biographies—those by Rudi Blesh and Tom Dardis—and Keaton's own autobiography. (Our page citations are from the 1966, 1979, and 1960 hardcover editions respectively.)

Marion Meade's biography (HarperCollins, 1995), published after our article, is also based on extensive interviews with Eleanor Keaton and other important figures in Keaton's life. It affirms "Joe's physical and emotional abuse" of Buster (34). (A good starting point might be the several entries under Meade's index heading "Keaton, Joseph Hallie 'Joe': abuse of Keaton by.")

Dardis, for example, notes that Keaton's height was 5' 4" when he was 21 years old, shortly before he and his mother ran away from his father (23). According to Blesh (345), Eleanor Keaton supported herself doing bit parts in the movies. This is our basis for referring to her as an actress. (Of course, she was also a dancer.)

Blesh's biography is based on personal interviews with, among others, Eleanor Keaton, and he presents "depths of sadness" as an indirect quote from her. (If Mrs. Keaton did not in fact say the words Blesh unequivocally attributes to her, then her argument is with Blesh, and not with us.)

As far as Keaton's personal history is concerned, the basic facts are not disputed by any reputable scholar: Keaton's father, Joe, Sr., drank heavily and constantly, and was violent when drunk (Dardis, 7; Blesh, 49–50). Buster Collier, one of Keaton's closest friends, characterized Joe to Dardis as "a living horror" whom Buster "learned to endure over the years" (23).

Nor is there any doubt that Joe inflicted both physical and psychological violence on Buster. Keaton himself describes their onstage fights as matters of deadly seriousness. Joe, when drunk, would "come on the stage wild," Blesh quotes Keaton as saying. "There were times when it was him or me, but we had to keep it funny" (81).

Keaton writes that Joe's drinking and lack of control

posed a direct threat to both son and father: "Being a half second off in throwing a kick or ducking a punch meant broken bones sooner or later. Pop never did become one of those falling-down drunks, but he didn't need to be to endanger the health of both of us." (*My Wonderful World of Slapstick* [New York: Doubleday, 1960], pp. 88–89.) The point is not only that onstage combat led to serious injuries (to *both* Buster and Joe—see Dardis, 12), but also that *potential* injuries were an ongoing source of anxiety for Buster.

Keaton also testifies in no uncertain terms to the physical and psychological coercion Joe employed to force Buster to permanently freeze his face in public. "In this knockabout act, my father and I used to hit each other with brooms, occasioning for me strange flops and falls. If I should chance to smile, the next hit would be a good deal harder. All the parental correction I ever received was with an audience looking on. I could not even whimper. . . . " (*Ladies Home Journal*, June 1926, p. 20. Quoted in Dardis, 11.) Keaton here clearly conveys the fear he felt in response to actual or threatened violence at his much larger father's hands.

Tobias et al. claim that "our" description of Joe's onstage speech is erroneous. In fact, the words "making children mind" are Buster Keaton's own. (Quoted in Dardis, 18.) The act's theme was parental correction of a child's behavior, and it consisted of violent interaction between a real father and his child. Moving to the realm of interpretation, Tobias et al. dispute our characterization of the theme of discipline as "emotionally charged" in the context of improvised combat and between a young boy and a father whom Ed Wynn, a contemporary, described as "a totally undisciplined drunk." (Quoted in Dardis, 7.) If anything, we seem to have understated the case.

Keaton's professional theatrical life and his family life were thus unusually and perniciously intertwined concerning punishment and public humiliation by his father. "After I was seven," Keaton writes, "Pop would punish me for misbehaving when we were working on the stage. He knew I was too proud of being able to take it to yell or cry" (14).

As to the effects of this treatment on Keaton's subsequent emotional history, we have Collier's testimony to Dardis that it was "*impossible* for his friend to express any sort of pain at any time" (145, emphasis in original). Dardis further notes that when Keaton recalled his father's brutality, "he did so in a mood of complete detachment about the regular beatings he received both on stage and off; they . . . had become an accepted part of his life" (2).

This apparent acceptance, based as it was on emotional repression, explains why Keaton didn't express his feelings about his father, even to those around him. As psychologist Alice Miller observes, when children are "abused for the sake of adults' needs by being exploited, beaten, punished . . . [then] the normal reaction to such injury should be anger and pain; since children in this hurtful kind of environment, however, are forbidden to express their anger and since it would be unbearable to experience their pain all alone, they are compelled to suppress their feelings, repress all memory of the trauma, and idealize those guilty of the abuse. . . . Their feelings of anger, helplessness, despair, longing, anxiety, and pain will find expression in destructive acts against others . . . or against themselves." (Quoted in *The Untouched Key*, p. 168.) The fact of Keaton's own history of alcoholism and mental blackouts (documented in both Blesh and Dardis) and extensive self-inflicted injuries (he claimed to have broken every bone in his body, one at a time) provides support for this interpretation.

In the context of her discussion of Keaton's own childhood history, Miller notes that "[a]lthough creativity permits survival and helps a person to live with psychic damage, it still conceals rather than reveals the truth. Thus it cannot prevent the person from being self-destructive" (43). The collapse of Keaton's personal and professional life in the early 1930s on the heels of the loss of independent film-making as a creative outlet seems to bear Miller out.

Tobias et al. stress that "opinions are not facts," and they illustrate this rather obvious point with a letter that is brimming with their own opinions. But this is to misunderstand the nature of critical interpretation, which is necessarily opinion based on factual evidence. The vast majority of scholarly work is nothing more or less than this.

Of course it is up to readers to decide whether or not our interpretation of evidence is credible. For example, is our designation of Joe Keaton as "abusive" unfair or unjustified? Keaton himself chooses this exact characterization: "I don't know how we lasted as long as we did. Finally—it was in February, 1917—Myra decided to call it quits. Joe was abusing her too." (Quoted in Blesh, 82.) Keaton here clearly includes himself and his mother as victims of Joe's abuse, and indicates that the abuse was of long standing. Blesh also provides evidence that Myra Keaton passively took Joe's part against

Buster when abuse occurred, and was generally ineffectual at protecting Buster from Joe's drunken assaults (80–81).

Of course, as we note, Keaton also calls his parents his "first bit of great luck." He writes that Joe had not even "an ounce of cruelty in him," and his beatings were simply intended to keep Buster from "get[ting] away with too much" (14). Tobias et al. believe that we should accept such statements at face value. Tobias et al. also parrot Joe Keaton approvingly and uncritically, even though Joe's stories typically distorted reality and positioned him as a victim, not a victimizer (Dardis, 20)—as did his onstage act with Buster.

Our approach differs. We find the omissions and inconsistencies in Keaton's testimony worth highlighting. For example, Keaton's accounts of the origins of his "stone face" diverge intriguingly. He writes in his autobiography that he was unaware of being funnier when he wasn't smiling until he was in his twenties (135); however, earlier in the book he says that when he went on stage as a very young child, "one of the first things I noticed was that whenever I smiled . . . the audience . . . didn't seem to laugh as much as usual" (13). Significantly, both accounts omit his father's coercive role.

Although we quote Keaton at length, Tobias et al. accuse us of "ignoring or dismissing Keaton's own opinions." Yet it seems to us that if they were to follow their own dictum, they would need to explain why he would mention wanting to "whimper," or to "yell or cry," when describing his performances with his father. They provide no such explanation. They claim that we have "tampered with history," but again decline to substantiate their charge. Likewise, they fail to back up their assertion that we "put words in people's mouths," with anything more than the specious "depths of sadness" example.

Given Tobias et al.'s acquaintance with a vast range of Keaton scholarship, the considered assessment of Keaton's most scholarly biographer, Tom Dardis, will doubtless be familiar to them: "It is likely that being knocked about on the stage every night of his life left indelible psychic scars on Buster. The curious passivity that is found in his relations with women and employers in later years may well have stemmed from this early training, which demanded total obedience. Those early years also had much to do with the formation of the superb spirit of comic gloom that suffuses his great films of the twenties" (11). Why do Tobias et al. recoil from such common-sense conclusions? Indeed, it would be truly remarkable if Keaton's highly conflicted relationship with his father had *not* played a dominant role in Keaton's later life.

Since the biographical facts reviewed above are well known, though their significance is often ignored, our article's main contribution, we believe, is to detail the ways in which Keaton expressed his formative childhood experience in his films. We analyze seven films made under Keaton's complete creative control, including much of his best-known work.

In addition to numerous specific images from Keaton's childhood, these films contain at their thematic and emotional centers stories of sons' comically desperate struggles to please domineering fathers and father figures. In *Steamboat Bill, Jr.*, for example, Keaton's character spends virtually the entire film contorting himself and undergoing trials in order to please his father, despite being repeatedly humiliated and bullied by him.

Tobias et al. object that the image of a small hero combating a larger oppressor is a common one. They cite its use by Chaplin and others and conclude, "one thing that can never be said about Charlie Chaplin is that he used great big villains to work out resentment towards an abusive father."

This is a telling assertion. As detailed in Chaplin's autobiography, his father was an alcoholic who abandoned his family to the workhouse before drinking himself to death. The assumption that Chaplin could not possibly harbor, among other feelings, resentment toward this man therefore seems ill-considered.

Moreover, Tobias et al. miss the point about the abusive figures of authority in Keaton's films: They are frequently and explicitly *fathers* and father figures to the Keaton character. Furthermore, in several films Keaton actually hired Joe, his own father, to play the part of the bullying male parent.

The psychological focus on the father-son rivalry, and the mix of love and hatred it entails, is a distinctive theme of Keaton's comedy. By ignoring what makes Keaton's work unique, Tobias et al. do Keaton a disservice. Their argument that Keaton's work should be homogenized into the "big villain/little hero tradition" inadvertently diminishes Keaton's creativity and the outstandingly original uses to which he put vaudeville convention. (This is also the case with their argument about Joe's sketches being the source of Buster's material.)

Tobias et al. protest that Keaton could not simultaneously cast Joe in the role of a punitive father in *Sherlock, Jr.*, and also have him reconcile with Keaton's character at the end. Indeed, psychologically, it can and does "work both ways." As noted in our article (21), the film's fantasy ending fulfills Keaton's deep wish for vindication and forgiveness despite Joe's abuse.

Finally, Tobias et al. offer "two vital pieces of infor-

mation" in order to set us straight: Keaton was creating fiction, they insist, and he was making comedy. Are we therefore to assume that works of "fiction" are not commonly and profoundly influenced by their creators' life experience? And do Tobias et al. actually mean to imply that the comic is an inappropriate subject of scholarship? Such stances would seem to preclude serious approaches to much of literature and film. Surely, given their concern to defend scholarly standards, Tobias et al. do not endorse the sort of blinkered reductionism their remarks convey.

The problem with trying to pass Buster Keaton off as simply "a happy and contented man" whose goal "was always to tell a story that would involve people and make us laugh" is that it illuminates nothing about either Keaton or creativity and obfuscates much about both. It is regrettably consonant with the least insightful works of Keaton biography and criticism. Uttering simple pieties about Keaton's "greatness" is easy. Thinking through the psychological effects of devastating trauma and their transformation into deeply personal art is a more difficult, but we think more rewarding, enterprise.

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Book Reviews

Black African Cinema

By Nwachukwu Frank Ukadike. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1994. $50.00 cloth; $17.00 paper.

Compelling in its revelations, candid in its assessment, and thorough in its analysis, *Black African Cinema* by Nwachukwu Frank Ukadike is one of the most comprehensive texts on African cinema now available. On the heels of Manthia Diawara's work, Ukadike provides his own examination of African cinema from an African perspective and unveils the social, political, and economic realities out of which this cinema has grown. His book explores a cinema "created by a colonial past and cemented by a neocolonial present" that has "prevented the emergence of a real national cinema capable of speaking for and to Africans" (1). Ukadike contends that black African cinema has survived daunting sociopolitical constraints to offer new insights and perspectives on African culture and history.

Ukadike first establishes the meaning of black African cinema, arguing that the term must be thought of as an umbrella to reflect the disparate works of African film-makers, often representing "diverse geopolitical and sociocultural perspectives whose ideologies and themes are different, though inflected by cinematic styles borrowed elsewhere" (7). He explores the ideological issues upon which this study rests in light of theorists such as Frantz Fanon, and deconstructs how European perceptions of black Africa have influenced the representations of Africans on the motion picture screen. His claim is that "[T]his image the filmmakers projected of Africa was to have a lasting effect, haunting not only the black people of Africa but also all blacks in the diaspora. Perhaps there is no country that exhibits motion pictures in which audiences have not seen a film of Hollywood origin, or a Hollywood-inspired film, that caricatures the African as a 'savage' or a jungle 'cannibal,' or that depicts the African American as a second-class citizen who is inferior to his white American counterpart" (36).

Exploring the influences of Francophone (French language) and Anglophone (English language) films, Ukadike situates his discussion within the films' larger sociopolitical context. He points to those Western countries that have monopolized the film industry as being at least partially responsible for inhibiting and limiting the works of African film-makers. Ukadike blames not only the industry but also the ineffective, weak, economically bankrupt, and corrupt African governments for their inability to foster the development, preservation, and cultivation of purely African arts—in particular cinema. Ukadike also critiques the immense Anglophone television influence as he briefly shifts his discussion from film to television. For example, he cites "Basi" (an independently produced program aired on Nigerian Television Authority-operated stations) as a model of television which "used imaginatively in a proper way becomes a potent catalyst for changing practices and attitudes, and [it] can also articulate a challenge for accelerated development" (120).

Ukadike contends that African cinema has managed to survive in the works of either self-taught film-makers or film-makers trained in other countries who then draw upon these countries' styles and techniques. Exploring and comparing the works of some of the better-known film-makers such as Ousmane Sembène and Med Hondo, Ukadike examines several of their more popular films, such as *Black Girl, Borom Sarret, Mandabi*, and *Soleil O.* He comments on the film-makers' styles and techniques, on the language barriers affecting the production and reception of these films, and on the historical context from which these films evolved. In his comparison of Sembène and Hondo, Ukadike asserts that "the ideological orientations of these two men gave direction to the creativity embodying the exposition, revivification and solidification of Africa's national cultural systems, which should be attributed to the revolutionary panAfrican awareness of this period. Although these filmmakers differ in both their approach to and style of filmmaking, their goals were the same—to facilitate the freedom of the oppressed with social justice and equality in every area of life" (91).

According to Ukadike, "[d]espite the general hegemony of Hollywood and European dominant conventions, black African film practice is strenuously attempting to modify these conventions—narratively, aesthetically, and ideologically—to suit the culture and situation under which black Africans have to function" (167). Recent films such as *Kodou, Touki-Bouki, Xala, Ceddo,* and *Harvest: 3,000 Years* represent a new wave of film-making. Ukadike argues that whereas films of the 1970s were searching for an African language and theme, films of the 1980s expanded on these themes, were much more sophisticated aesthetically, and at the same time tried to demystify colonial misconceptions. Furthermore, many of these films—especially those produced in South Af-

rica, such as *Sarafina, Mapantsula, Last Grave at Dimbaza, Cry Freedom,* and *A World Apart*—have been used as political tools to pave the road for a new era of liberation. (Unfortunately, many of these films could not seem to escape Western influence, often even featuring leading African-American actors, such as Whoopi Goldberg in *Sarafina.*)

Ukadike argues that the popularity of African films of the eighties is a result of filmic subterfuge (attempts to retain one's national identity while resisting assimilation); passion for ethnographic information (thematic construction); profilmic and extrafilmic organization (immutable landscape); and aesthetic reconciliation (the incorporation of oral art). He concludes with an examination of more contemporary films such as *Tilai, Yeleen, Yaaba, Zan Boko, Finzan, La Vie est belle,* and *Bal poussière*—films that challenge existing cultural and social mores or that juxtapose the past and the present. More importantly, however, these films provide a representative and self-created portrayal of black African life and culture.

Although Ukadike denounces the influence of Western views on shaping African cinema, many of the film critics or scholars he mentions (Clyde Taylor, Louise Spence, Douglas Gomery, James Hoberman, Thomas Cripps, Robert C. Allen) are Westerners. Perhaps he felt the need to appeal to a wide, unlimited audience, but he leaves the reader hungry for information about black African scholars' response to this new cinema. As one who is familiar with African-American film history, I found the most fascinating revelation of *Black African Cinema* to be the similarity between black Africans and African Americans in terms of how social, political, and economic forces have shaped the cinemas of both cultures.

CHARLENE REGESTER

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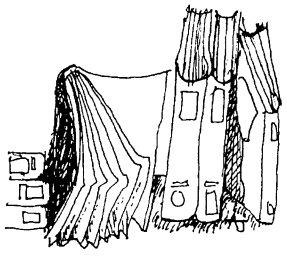

Five Filmmakers

Tarkovsky, Forman, Polanski, Szabó, Makavejev

Edited by Daniel J. Goulding. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1994. $45.00 cloth; $18.95 paper.

Much has happened since the first films of Eastern Europe's "new wave" broke across Western screens in the late 1950s, and the question that hangs over *Five Filmmakers* is whether the very appellation "Eastern European" has lost much of its force as a means of identification and organization. Even overlooking the region's recent political changes, the careers of these five directors raise their own particularly pointed questions about notions of national and transnational identity and their relevance in the identification of an authorial or group style. The overarching concern of editor Daniel Goulding's book is the transition each of these directors underwent as he moved West. For the most part, what all of the book's six authors discover is a wealth of convincing continuities. These continuities, however, only raise a host of additional problems for maintaining the organizing category of an Eastern European identity.

If these five directors reflect a group identity that justifies yoking them together in a single volume, it is paradoxical that a more motley collection of stylists would be difficult to imagine. Even in terms of tone or thematic concerns, these are very different artists. While both Forman and Polanski at least briefly thrived as mainstream Hollywood directors, they represent almost antithetical sensibilities. Similarly, it is impossible to imagine a single one of Tarkovsky's signature long takes (much less his increasingly radical assaults on continuity film-making narration) in the films of any of these other directors; and Makavejev's unique admixture of documentary and fiction has virtually nothing in common with the rest.

The essays in this book quickly pass over the urban, cosmopolitan backgrounds that link these five directors. Yet this common feature begins to force open the question of whether the reflex of looking first for national antecedents with which to account for thematic or stylistic continuities may be stifling. However one defines "Kafkaesque," the films of Miloš Forman are hardly world cinema's best example. Yet Peter Hames manages to argue for a string of such Czech connections. In the same fashion Herbert Eagle, who otherwise concedes that there is little that is identifiably Polish in even the Polish films of Polanski, can't keep himself from reaching for the Eastern European Kafka where Hitchcock would have served at least as well. The case of

rica, such as *Sarafina, Mapantsula, Last Grave at Dimbaza, Cry Freedom,* and *A World Apart*—have been used as political tools to pave the road for a new era of liberation. (Unfortunately, many of these films could not seem to escape Western influence, often even featuring leading African-American actors, such as Whoopi Goldberg in *Sarafina.*)

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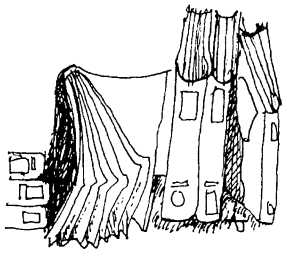

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Much has happened since the first films of Eastern Europe's "new wave" broke across Western screens in the late 1950s, and the question that hangs over *Five Filmmakers* is whether the very appellation "Eastern European" has lost much of its force as a means of identification and organization. Even overlooking the region's recent political changes, the careers of these five directors raise their own particularly pointed questions about notions of national and transnational identity and their relevance in the identification of an authorial or group style. The overarching concern of editor Daniel Goulding's book is the transition each of these directors underwent as he moved West. For the most part, what all of the book's six authors discover is a wealth of convincing continuities. These continuities, however, only raise a host of additional problems for maintaining the organizing category of an Eastern European identity.

If these five directors reflect a group identity that justifies yoking them together in a single volume, it is paradoxical that a more motley collection of stylists would be difficult to imagine. Even in terms of tone or thematic concerns, these are very different artists. While both Forman and Polanski at least briefly thrived as mainstream Hollywood directors, they represent almost antithetical sensibilities. Similarly, it is impossible to imagine a single one of Tarkovsky's signature long takes (much less his increasingly radical assaults on continuity film-making narration) in the films of any of these other directors; and Makavejev's unique admixture of documentary and fiction has virtually nothing in common with the rest.

The essays in this book quickly pass over the urban, cosmopolitan backgrounds that link these five directors. Yet this common feature begins to force open the question of whether the reflex of looking first for national antecedents with which to account for thematic or stylistic continuities may be stifling. However one defines "Kafkaesque," the films of Miloš Forman are hardly world cinema's best example. Yet Peter Hames manages to argue for a string of such Czech connections. In the same fashion Herbert Eagle, who otherwise concedes that there is little that is identifiably Polish in even the Polish films of Polanski, can't keep himself from reaching for the Eastern European Kafka where Hitchcock would have served at least as well. The case of

Makavejev's *Innocence Unprotected* (*Nevinost bez zaštite*, 1968) serves as a dramatic illustration of the problem. While one can hardly imagine a film more explicitly concerned with national identity, it is impossible to shrug off the fact that while the film was receiving a Silver Bear in Berlin (1968) it was playing to empty seats in Yugoslavia. This rather sobering contradiction should force us to ask whether what is most interesting about the film represents what is least Yugoslavian about it. If Makavejev's taste in irony and ambiguity, political and social satire, Brechtian distantiation devices, discontinuous "collage" narrative structures, bizarre plot twists, and surrealistic images has nothing to do with "Yugoslavianness," it has everything to do with the tastes of a transnational class of viewers found on college campuses, at film festivals, and in urban art houses around the world.

While there may be some good reasons for holding onto the supra-national category of "Eastern European," the best of all reasons has recently disappeared. Though one can point to such unifying characteristics of Goulding's five directors as their film-school training, the primary reason Eastern Europe has been kept alive as a separate category of film-making even without an identifiable group style resides in postwar political realities in place until just recently. That is, all of those who worked within this style were under explicit (albeit shifting) ideological constraints institutionally imposed by their respective socialist bureaucracies. However, what was clearly a historical condition regarding production circumstances turns out to be difficult to locate as a shaping force when examining the thematic content of Eastern texts against Western texts. When these filmmakers move out from under these conditions, there is no detectable change in the representation of political issues. The only substantial difference lies in reception: all that changes is how audiences read the films.

At one point or another, each of the writers in *Five Filmmakers* makes an appeal for an allegorical reading of at least one of their director's European titles. Tarkovsky's *Stalker* (1979) is "an indictment of Soviet repression of intellectual and artistic freedom" (vii); Forman's *Firemen's Ball* is "a continuous allegory on both the state of society and, more specifically, of the Communist party" (59); Szabó's *The Age of Daydreaming* (*Álmodozások kora*, 1964) is "a parable with political implications" (163); the two men in Polanski's *Two Men and a Wardrobe* are "concentration camp survivors" or "victims of Stalinist purges" (100); strongman Aleksic in Makavejev's *Innocence Unprotected* is Tito; etc. Moreover, the argument made throughout the book is that such readings characterize the way the films were initially received—in both the East and West. However, the confidence with which such readings are generated undergoes immediate transformation once discussion turns to Western productions.

For Hames, Forman's allegorically richest film should by rights be *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* (1975). However, the film's American heritage only creates problems. Though Forman wanted to make, in Hames' words, "a political film 'about' America" (68), the result displays a far closer allegorical fit to Czechoslovakia. Consequently Hames is forced to acknowledge that whereas Czechoslovakians such as director Jiří Menzel were eager to "misread" *Cuckoo's Nest* as another Forman allegory "about" Czechoslovakia's battle with totalitarianism, Americans were equally inclined to miss Forman's intentions and see it as "literally about mental health" (73). Quite simply, the ability to read allegory grows stronger in the shade of explicit censorship. And as political repression is lifted, so is the impetus to search for such meanings.

The writers Goulding has assembled are quite distinguished, with extensive credentials in their respective domains of Eastern European cinema. Though several try to express some degree of discomfort over the appellation "auteurism," none of them are in any important way doing anything else. Indeed, in so far as they portray their respective directors as voices fighting for expression within a system designed to extract ideological and stylistic conformity, these authors represent auteurism in its most classical, Sarrisian form.

It is very surprising, in light of his previous writings, that the weakest of the five sections is Herbert Eagle's piece on Polanski. Where all the other essays draw on a substantial amount of primary research, Eagle leans heavily on such secondary sources as Barbara Leaming and Virginia Wright Wexman for his analysis of voyeurism and gender. While the other writers approach the project with the intention of some measure of completeness, Eagle discusses only six titles—*Two Men and a Wardrobe, Knife in the Water* (*Nóż w wodzie*, 1962), *Repulsion* (1965), *Rosemary's Baby* (1968), *Macbeth* (1971), and *Chinatown* (1974)—less than half the director's output. Even more surprising is a certain absence of methodological continuity that often leaves the reader with the sense of disconnected essays rather than an attempt at a unified analysis of a career. For example, while an analysis of Polanski's films that developed his relationship to the horror film might have been quite useful, Eagle hardly mentions the issue of genre until *Chinatown*, where he rehashes the film's obvious relationship to film noir. Propp makes an appearance during the discussion of *Knife in the Water,* only to disappear without a trace as the essay goes on. Eagle's concern with Polanski's visual style flows and ebbs across the essay, though he is assiduous in his virtually complete neglect of the use of sound. Although he attempts to

show that Polanski is consistently concerned with attacking patriarchy, the search for phallic symbols that dominates his discussion of some of the earlier films thankfully atrophies as the essay unfolds.

The book's other problem is that history has already opened up new questions. Unless I missed it, Goulding fails to mention Makavejev's ethnicity—a lacuna that would be hard to imagine had the section been written more recently than 1992. Equally absent is any useful address of the problems currently faced by Eastern European film-makers. One of the unexamined features of this particular wave of emigration is that it has for the most part been one-way. While industries in America and Europe have for decades been heavily populated by emigres, many famous cases (such as Lang and Pabst) ultimately returned "home." Except for Makavejev's *Manifesto* (1988)—a Golan Globus production shot in Zagreb—and Forman's *Amadeus* (1984)—another Western-financed production shot in the director's homeland—this book points to no attempts to exploit the new opportunities that liberalization initially promised. Ironically, the Westward career path of these and other emigres looks no more reversible since the recent political thaw.

DAVID B. PRATT

■ David B. Pratt is completing a dissertation in the Institute for Liberal Arts at Emory University.

Hollywood Censored

Morality Codes, Catholics, and the Movies

By Gregory D. Black. New York: Cambridge University Press, 1994. $27.95.

In 1936, three years before the outbreak of the Second World War, writer Robert Sherwood won the first of his four Pulitzer Prizes for *Idiot's Delight*, an antiwar play set in an Italian community near the Swiss border. In the play, the Italian government bombed Paris and began World War II. Sherwood's work was not only antiwar but anti-Italian and antifascist as well. He condemned the fascists for "their hysterical self-worship and psychopathic hatred of others" (282).

When Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer decided to make a film from Sherwood's work, alarm signals went off in offices of the Motion Picture Producers and Distributors of America (M.P.A.A.), where president Will H. Hays (an admirer of Mussolini) and Joseph I. Breen, head of the Production Code Administration (P.C.A.), considered movies opposing war or fascism to be "dangerous" (283). Pressured by the Italian government to terminate the project, Hays and MGM agreed to accept the Italian consul in Los Angeles as a technical adviser and to give the Italian government the right to approve the final script. When the movie finally appeared in 1939 (with Sherwood's acquiescence), writes Gregory D. Black, its message had become little more than a "silly love story set in Central Europe" (286).

The emasculation of *Idiot's Delight* is only one example of the many changes imposed on movies by the P.C.A. Black provides a wealth of similar case studies in this informative book about motion picture censorship during the 1930s. His work makes compelling reading and is especially timely in light of recent attempts to regulate visual communication. These efforts have come from such varied sources as feminists, church leaders, and the office of the U.S. Attorney General. In 1992, the Roman Catholic Cardinal of Los Angeles, Roger Mahoney, even urged a return to the guidelines set out in the motion picture Production Code of 1930, a set of restrictions abandoned by Hollywood in the late 1960s in favor of the current ratings system.

The current debate over guidelines for popular entertainment is best understood when set into its historical context. In 1930, Hollywood adopted a code that tried to weigh movie content against a standard of morality—the Ten Commandments—that was beyond the influence of an unpredictable public opinion. As implemented, under the leadership first of Hays and then of Eric A. Johnston (who succeeded Hays as president of the M.P.A.A. in 1945), the code also forced movie studios to avoid radical social commentary and to endorse free enterprise and social conservatism. Although the code remained in existence until the late 1960s, it was most effectively enforced during the 1930s. Critics understood at the time that the only way to control Hollywood was to threaten the box office. Accordingly, in 1934 Roman Catholics created the Legion of Decency, which organized several million followers to boycott offensive films. During the Great Depression, when many studios teetered on the brink of economic ruin, the mere threat of a boycott was usually sufficient to bring compliance with the Production Code.

Black's book details how the censorship process worked during the 1930s. Using an impressive array of primary sources that include archdiocese archives, the papers of such figures as Hays, Cecil B. DeMille, Daniel Lord, and Martin Quigley, as well as the Production Code Administration Files in Beverly Hills, Black provides us with the best account yet of movie censorship

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during the decade of the Great Depression, surpassing Paul Facey's 1945 study, *The Legion of Decency. Hollywood Censored* is especially good in detailing the tensions between the Legion and censors in the Production Code Administration, as well as disagreements among Catholics themselves over what policy to follow during the 1930s.

Black's book also adds significantly to the information found in other important studies of the film industry and censorship provided by such writers as Edward de Grazia and Roger K. Newman, Robert Sklar, Garth Jowett, Nick Roddick, Richard S. Randall, Ruth A. Inglis, Richard Randall, and Raymond Moley, to name a few. This book also has a different focus from that of *The Dame in the Kimono* (1993), by Leonard J. Leff and Jerold L. Simmons. While Black deals with some of the same pictures (e.g., such Mae West movies as *Belle of the Nineties, I'm No Angel,* and *Klondike Annie*), he goes into more depth than Leff and Simmons in explaining how censors changed these films. Black's work is best read in conjunction with another recent book, *The Cross and the Cinema* (1993), by James M. Skinner, who also writes about the Legion of Decency. Skinner, however, focuses more on the 1950s and 1960s, a period beyond the scope of *Hollywood Censored.*

Black demonstrates that anti-Semitism—for most of the major movie producers in the 1930s were Jewish—was a factor behind efforts to regulate movie content. Perhaps the most blatant anti-Semite was Breen, the Catholic layman and former newspaperman who became head of the P.C.A. in 1934. Breen's correspondence in the Wilfrid Parsons Papers and Daniel Lord Papers reveals that he reviled Jews during the early 1930s as "debauched," a "dirty, filthy lot," utterly without morality (170).

But anti-Semitism was not the only factor driving the debate over motion pictures. Legitimate questions existed about what influence this medium, which regularly exploited sex and violence, had on audiences, especially the young. Such social reformers as Jane Addams worried that movies had an unhealthy effect on impressionable children. A few years later, the social scientists who authored the Payne Fund Studies claimed that moving pictures encouraged juvenile delinquency. Black maintains that Hays "remained silent" (154) about the Studies, when in fact Hays worked behind the scenes to discredit them by turning to such "experts" as Mortimer Adler. Black argues, as have others, that the Payne Fund Studies were hardly objective, having been initiated "to get the goods on the movies, and nail them to the wall" (152). If so, Hays understood that one way to blunt criticism of the movie industry and at the same time muddle such issues as film's influence on the young was to use contradictory authorities.

One of Black's most interesting chapters deals with motion pictures and modern literature. Lord, the Jesuit priest who was the primary author of the 1930 Production Code, and Quigley, the Catholic publisher who helped facilitate the code's adoption, believed that films were dangerous because they popularized modern ideas that had first taken root in universities, literature, and the theater. Black examines Paramount's efforts to make film versions of Ernest Hemingway's antiwar novel, *A Farewell to Arms*, William Faulkner's *Sanctuary* (brought to the screen by Paramount under the title of *The Story of Temple Drake*), and Sinclair Lewis's popular novel, *Ann Vickers.* Here, more often than not, Hays revealed himself as more an advocate for the films (e.g., *Temple Drake*) than a moralist. For this reason among others, Catholics distrusted Hays and believed he favored the industry's interests over their own. Indeed, Black observes that as a "public relations agent," Hays was "an unqualified success" (31).

A series of developments during the late 1940s and 1950s eroded the Production Code and eventually the industry discarded it and replaced it with the current rating system. But while moviemakers today have greater freedom than at any time in the past, the content of modern entertainment remains a source of controversy. Black's book offers a valuable perspective on the larger debate now underway over the content of not just motion pictures, but television, popular music, computer games, and even the Internet. *Hollywood Censored* should be of interest not only to film historians, but more broadly to anyone concerned about the regulation of communication.

STEPHEN VAUGHN

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Akira Kurosawa and Intertextual Cinema

By James Goodwin. Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1994. $45.00 cloth; $14.95 paper.

James Goodwin's interesting new study dissects several films of Akira Kurosawa from the perspective of intertextuality, a concept previous critics have broached but never emphasized as a primary tool of analysis for understanding the director's work. Though Goodwin discusses *Something Like an Autobiography* and mentions virtually all of the great director's films,

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the core of this book is his close analysis of six films—*Ikiru* and the most prominent literary adaptations (*Rashomon, Throne of Blood, The Idiot, The Lower Depths,* and *Ran*).

The intertextuality angle is in many ways a fruitful one. Negotiating between the narrow conceptions of the term that restrict it on the one hand to adaptations and on the other to broad notions (via Kristeva and Barthes) that every text is an intertext, Goodwin defines intertextual cinema as "films and the work of cineastes that exhibit conscious, marked, or dominant uses of intertextuality" (16), so that "various social discourses, cultural codes, and image systems" are distributed and interwoven into the works (21).

Goodwin finds intertextuality informing much of Kurosawa's career: in the director's propensity for dialogue and argument with a screenwriter during preproduction; in his preference for the wipe cut which juxtaposes two images in a dynamic fashion; and in the play of shot/reverse-shot of character looks that dominates *The Idiot*, where "a dramaturgy of exchanged regards gives visual structure and psychological texture to each scene" (75). Such a reading as this last proves a persuasive rejoinder to the received wisdom that *The Idiot* is a complete failure.

And emphasizing social discourses and cultural codes à la Bakhtinian dialogism enables Goodwin to introduce new interpretations to the much-analyzed landmarks: in *Rashomon,* the bandit's narration is marked by ironic Hollywood-style clichés of heroism and romance (thundering music accompanying his ride on the horse), which "comically convey the self-inflated quality of his claims to prowess and bravery" (130). The samurai's self-described suicide is an instance of romantic agony rather than fulfillment of *bushido*. Such fresh insights represent the highlights of the book, and they appear in many of the analyses.

In pursuit of intertextuality, Goodwin makes what I found to be one of his most valuable contributions to the body of Kurosawa criticism—his attention to how frequently Kurosawa films dramatize the very process of narration. "In unique ways," he writes, "*Rashomon* demonstrates in the context of the courtyard and gate locales (scenes of narration) how plots are made from story events set in the forest locales (scenes of action)." Goodwin notes that the denizens of *The Lower Depths* alternate storytelling and listening amongst themselves, or that the frame story of *Rashomon* at the town gate resembles the structure and characters of a Noh play.

Yet many of Goodwin's most striking interpretive insights into Kurosawa's work are remote from the question of intertextuality. For example, he stresses the unusual (for Kurosawa) preponderance of close-ups in *Ikiru*, which in his account play upon the distinction between the face as a social mask (a motif of many Japanese New Wave films) or as a mirror of the soul. He notes the prevalent motif of rising and falling (from Watanabe's coat in the doctor's office to his spill on the ice, and his assistant's silent rise and descent in protest at the end of the film). For sheer thoroughness, he gives us a detailed assessment of *Ran*, including close comparisons with *King Lear.* The author of a valuable book on Eisenstein, Goodwin is a compelling and insightful critic (though *Akira Kurosawa and Intertextual Cinema* would have benefited from many more frame enlargements).

I completed this book thinking that there is no question that Kurosawa is well suited to a discussion that pivots on the issue of intertextuality. But then I began to wonder. If, as Goodwin argues, wipe cuts are optical intertextuality; if the voice-over narrator of *Ikiru* is an intertext from Kurosawa's brother Heigo's work as a *benshi*; if in the same film Watanabe's sensation of drowning is an intertext Kurosawa draws from his own life experience—then what is *not* an intertext? And if all these are constituents of Kurosawa's intertextual cinema, we have strayed from Goodwin's notion that intertextual works foreground their intertextuality (in a "conscious, marked or dominant" fashion—the autobiographical intertexts do not jump out at us like a Godardian intertitle referring to Céline's novels). By these standards, David Bordwell's *Ozu and the Poetics of Cinema*, Donald Kirihara's *Patterns of Time*, and Stephen Prince's *The Warrior's Camera* place equal emphasis on intertextuality in Japanese directors' work by stressing the three film-makers' contemporary culture and its inscription in their film-making—they just don't use the terminology of intertextuality. And if we acknowledge, as Goodwin does in his concluding chapter, that "the specificity of cinema as a medium derives, paradoxically, from the heterogeneity of the materials it incorporates" (232), then isn't *every* film automatically intertextual? What films are not, and why not?

A second difficulty I found with Goodwin's approach is that "intertextual cinema," a poststructuralist stance, pits him against the auteurist notion of individual agency in the making of films. Admittedly, it's a tightrope act to study the films of one director in a poststructuralist context, one that few if any scholars have accomplished with grace and conviction. Still, I felt Goodwin lost his balance at several points in the argument. He makes frequent use of *Something Like an Autobiography* and interviews with Kurosawa to substantiate his poststructuralist position: at one point he approvingly quotes Kurosawa to the effect that the director is not an auteur (27)! Goodwin takes care to caution the reader that "Creative intention does not fix an itinerary of sense or meaning in a text" (22) and that Derrida stresses that we use the author's name as "an ongoing problem or

complex for interpretation" (28). But when Goodwin writes that Kurosawa filmed *The Lower Depths* with the "detached gaze" Zeami prescribed for the Noh (98), or that "in considering *King Lear*, Kurosawa was puzzled that Shakespeare had given his characters no past" (197), and quotes the director, then the author's name and statements become a privileged interpretation and even a sketch of the films' production history. The language may be intended as a metaphor; the net effect slides into traditional auteur study.

My third objection involves intertextuality of another stripe. Goodwin in his introduction usefully points out his disagreements with prior critics of Kurosawa: that we are mistaken to follow Noël Burch in emphasizing intertextuality as a quality virtually unique to Japanese culture or in reducing Kurosawa's modernist elements to Japanese traits; that we can complicate Donald Richie's argument that the films dramatize the concept of *bushido* by thinking of his characters as in process rather than fully formed; that Joan Mellen's claim that Kurosawa stereotypes women is refuted by "the extensive interchange of attributes in personality among principal characters, male and female alike" in *The Idiot* and *Red Beard* (21).

While I was fascinated and persuaded by these broad and enlivening counterthrusts to previous wisdom, I was disappointed to find that Goodwin had chosen not to acknowledge adequately his agreements with the voluminous prior writings on Kurosawa: "My general critical practice is not to annotate each point of contact, convergence, or divergence between my study and the body of published scholarship on Kurosawa. . . . I note only the principal counterparts to my ideas in the secondary literature" (ix).

And indeed, you would never know from reading this book that Richie had written of the role of ego and pride in the conduct and falsifications of the different narrators of *Rashomon*; that Richie and Joseph Anderson had noted the influence of Sadao Yamankaka's *Humanity and Paper Balloons* on Kurosawa's *The Lower Depths*; that David Desser had described the impact of Shingeki Theater on Kurosawa's film-making in *Eros Plus Massacre*; or that Stephen Prince had noted the centrality of the sump to the imagery of *Drunken Angel* or applied Bakhtin's notion of dialogism to Kurosawa's work. Indeed, Prince's comprehensive, multifaceted, and illuminating study is the most unjustly neglected of all, for it makes many similar claims about the films. (By contrast, Goodwin generously cites literary critics like Jan Kott (1963), A.C. Bradley (1906), and Cleanth Brooks (1947) on the significance of *Macbeth* in the segment on *Throne of Blood*.)

I don't mean to overstate my criticisms; Kurosawa scholars and fans will benefit from reading Goodwin's perceptive interpretations. But I believe the chief accomplishments of *Akira Kurosawa and Intertextual Cinema* are its interpretive coups rather than its conceptual commitments. I came to feel that "intertextuality" functions here more as a rubric that unifies a study of diverse texts chosen as much for their interest to the critic as for their pertinence as examples of intertextuality. I also felt dissatisfied with a study of intertextual cinema that does not see fit to acknowledge the breadth and depth of film criticism as itself an intertextual enterprise.

MATTHEW BERNSTEIN

■ Matthew Bernstein teaches courses on Japanese cinema at Emory University.

The New Latin American Cinema

A Continental Project

By Zuzana M. Pick. Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 1993. $37.50 cloth; $16.95 paper.

In the introduction to *The New Latin American Cinema: A Continental Project*, Zuzana M. Pick says that the goal of her book "is to explore the institutional and aesthetic foundations of the New Latin American Cinema . . . " (1). Pick frames the book within "six areas of inquiry—history, authorship, gender, popular cinema, ethnicity, and exile"—in order to investigate the New Latin American Cinema as both a specific regional or national practice and a continental project (4). The book's six chapters attempt to address these issues in a systematic manner.

Within the area of Latin American cinema studies, there has been a long-standing need for a book that would provide a good general introduction. In the preface, Pick says that the outline for her study came out of a course she taught, and because of its origin in the classroom the book is indeed an excellent introduction. But it is also overly broad and general in nature, and it requires some patience to work through its at times turgid prose and mis/overuse of critical terms. However, for the scholar interested in the topic, this book would be a good starting point for a general look at the New Latin American Cinema.

Pick's main premises are that the New Latin American Cinema is a political and cinematic project originating in a modernist aesthetic and continuing to this day. I agree with Pick's claim in terms of the former, but the latter is more difficult to defend in light of the complex

complex for interpretation" (28). But when Goodwin writes that Kurosawa filmed *The Lower Depths* with the "detached gaze" Zeami prescribed for the Noh (98), or that "in considering *King Lear*, Kurosawa was puzzled that Shakespeare had given his characters no past" (197), and quotes the director, then the author's name and statements become a privileged interpretation and even a sketch of the films' production history. The language may be intended as a metaphor; the net effect slides into traditional auteur study.

My third objection involves intertextuality of another stripe. Goodwin in his introduction usefully points out his disagreements with prior critics of Kurosawa: that we are mistaken to follow Noël Burch in emphasizing intertextuality as a quality virtually unique to Japanese culture or in reducing Kurosawa's modernist elements to Japanese traits; that we can complicate Donald Richie's argument that the films dramatize the concept of *bushido* by thinking of his characters as in process rather than fully formed; that Joan Mellen's claim that Kurosawa stereotypes women is refuted by "the extensive interchange of attributes in personality among principal characters, male and female alike" in *The Idiot* and *Red Beard* (21).

While I was fascinated and persuaded by these broad and enlivening counterthrusts to previous wisdom, I was disappointed to find that Goodwin had chosen not to acknowledge adequately his agreements with the voluminous prior writings on Kurosawa: "My general critical practice is not to annotate each point of contact, convergence, or divergence between my study and the body of published scholarship on Kurosawa. . . . I note only the principal counterparts to my ideas in the secondary literature" (ix).

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and significantly changed political landscape throughout Latin America since this cinema's inception, and brings to the fore some weaknesses in Pick's scholarship. And although she attempts to frame her analysis in familiar categories such as gender, class, ethnicity, etc., current scholarship would recognize the need to at least acknowledge the existence of differences of theoretical and political opinion in relation to the body of work presented.

Because Pick does not engage with or give space to a number of these differences, the book more often makes its claims by fiat than by argumentation or demonstration. Although well researched, it does not discuss in a complex or critical manner the differences in scholarship; it does not define the terms of its argumentation; nor does it provide consistent criteria by which the film selections are made.

In the first chapter, "Convergences and Divergences," Pick provides an excellent historic and critical overview of the development of the New Latin American Cinema as a distinctive and important cinematographic movement. Although the chapter fills a gap in the literature (especially where it compiles disparate primary source materials into an accessible form), it also demonstrates the difficulty inherent in projects aimed at both general and scholarly audiences. For instance, Pick says, " . . . the New Latin American Cinema named practices that proposed to revolutionize the cinema by breaking away from the tenets of mainstream national productions" (20). However, she does not provide a clear definition or example of what those tenets are as a point of comparison for the general reader. At the same time, a scholarly reader would not necessarily accept the generalization so readily: current scholarship is revealing that the supposedly mainstream texts produced by the national cinemas of various Latin American countries are not of necessity as ideologically transparent or easily categorized as Pick's restatement of a traditional dichotomy in the scholarship would have us believe.

The second chapter is a consideration of authorship and spectatorship in the New Latin American Cinema; it also continues the discussion of the historical genealogy of the movement by analyzing four well-known films, including *The Brickmakers* (Colombia, 1967–1972) and *The Hour of the Furnaces* (Argentina, 1965–1968). The films chosen are considered important works within the canon, and Pick provides an intelligent and well-documented analysis. By focusing on the question of how the issue of authorship was historically defined within the movement, Pick here avoids the pitfall of making broad generalizations and provides an extremely useful discussion of the films selected.

"Gendered Identities and Femininity" attempts to show the importance of women film-makers' work for the development of the New Latin American Cinema. Pick says, "The distinctive aspects of Latin American women's cinemas have yet to be investigated" (68). Rather than providing that investigation, however, Pick simply offers examples of various representational strategies used by women directors in exploring issues of gender, and confines her discussion of gender to heterosexual relations. She selects Luisa Bemberg's *Camila* (Argentina, 1984) for close analysis, a choice that makes sense in light of Bemberg's status as one of the only women directors working in Argentina. Because of the artistic and critical importance of Frida Kahlo, Pick also selects Paul Leduc's *Frida: La Naturaleza Viva* (Mexico, 1984). In her introduction to this film, she mentions Marcela Fernandez Violante's 1971 documentary on Kahlo without, however, using it as a counterpoint to Leduc's film, declaring early in her analysis that *Frida* is another example of the New Latin American Cinema's modernist project. Although Pick feels Leduc's treatment of the artist as cultural icon is ambivalent, she asserts that the film's "movement between historical iconography and cinematic mise-en-scène" contributes "to the rewriting of women's history in Mexico and Latin America" (96). Unfortunately, Pick does not provide an alternative view or discussion of the film, which has been the subject of much debate among women film-makers in Mexico and whose status as a feminist statement is by no means agreed upon by Mexican critics.

In the same vein, Pick selects Valeria Sarmiento's *A Man, When He Is a Man* (Germany-Costa Rica, 1982) for analysis. She states, "The film offers a very personal view of gender relations in Latin American cultures. . . " (70). Apparently Pick chose Sarmiento's film because the film-maker was part of "a generation of women who began making films in the early 1970s" (70) during the Allende regime in Chile. However, when viewed in the context of a larger body of work produced and directed by women in this period, Sarmiento's film is by no means the most representative on this topic. Pick's take on the film shows her propensity for making broad and sweeping statements—she says that *A Man* " . . . works through the gendered character of individual and collective forms of social conduct and unveils the forms of behavior that have entrenched the myth of sexual mastery of Latin males" (71). Just as this rather conventional film reduces gender relations to often clichéd tropes, Pick reduces a very complex and often nationally determined view of gender to the stereotype of the Latin macho. Current gender studies theory and criticism are attempting to provide a more complex and nuanced view of gender and power relations, especially in terms of the way they are negotiated culturally and nationally.

Chapter 4 ("Popular Memory and the Power of Ad-

dress") and chapter 5 ("Cultural Difference and Representation") are complementary sections within the book. The former deals with social class, the latter with issues of race and ethnicity. Although both chapters provide sound and well-researched discussions of the issues along with background information, Pick does not often identify her terms; she says, for instance, "[P]opular cinema is basically an oppositional mode of filmmaking—rather than an historically sanctioned practice—that seeks to produce oppositional meanings and underscore the resisting power of popular culture" (103). According to her definition, popular cinema utilizes the local culture and beliefs of the people being represented as a critical gesture of solidarity and resistance. But this definition of popular cinema patently ignores national cinemas such as Mexico's during President Echevarría's administration, when film-makers foregrounded popular religious and cultural practices as part of a national intellectual discussion of identity and history.

Chapter 6 provides an extended discussion of exile and displacement, a topic which previous film scholarship has tended to minimize in its emphasis on the films from the overtly revolutionary period of the late 1960s and early 1970s. During this time, some film-makers believed their film-making practices could lead to wholesale socialist revolutions in their respective countries. Pick does an excellent job of synthesizing and compiling work on this subject and her thorough analysis of *Tangos: The Exile of Gardel* (Argentina-France, 1985) will be extremely useful.

The conclusion reiterates the premises of the book—that the New Latin American Cinema has its roots in modernism and that the project continues to this day. In a note in the conclusion, Pick acknowledges that a number of Mexican critics find the notion of categorizing these films as a specific movement problematic. However, she provides this opposing viewpoint with only one brief paragraph. Throughout the book, she quotes extensively from Julianne Burton's "Marginal Cinemas and Mainstream Critical Theory" (*Screen*, vol. 26, nos. 3–4 [1985]), yet she fails to mention Teshome Gabriel's well-known response to Burton's essay, "Colonialism and 'Law and Order' Criticism" (*Screen*, vol. 27, nos. 3–4 [1986]). Pick's failure to critically engage her own position or to thoroughly discuss the scholarly alternatives weakens her overall argument and renders it unconvincing.

CHRISTOPHER ORTIZ

■ Christopher Ortiz holds the doctorate from the Department of Film and Television at UCLA.

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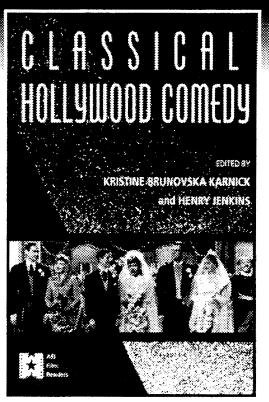

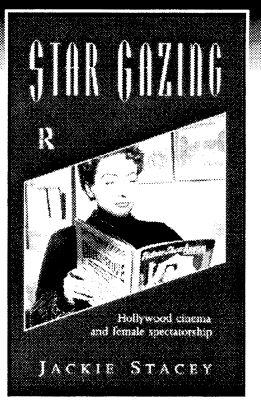

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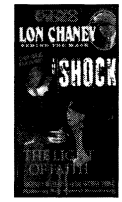

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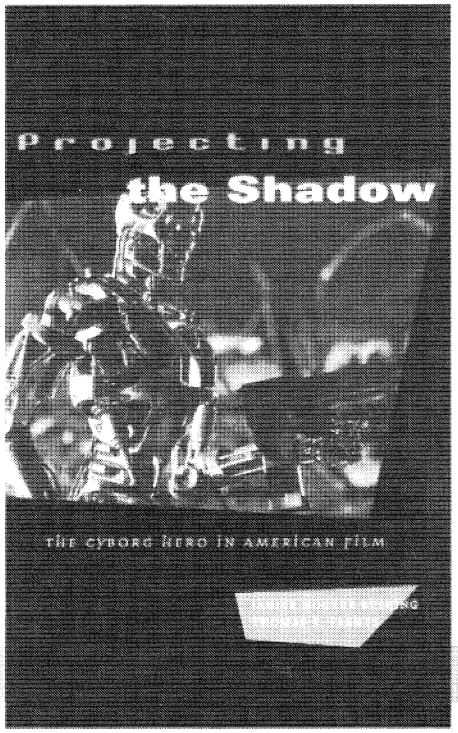

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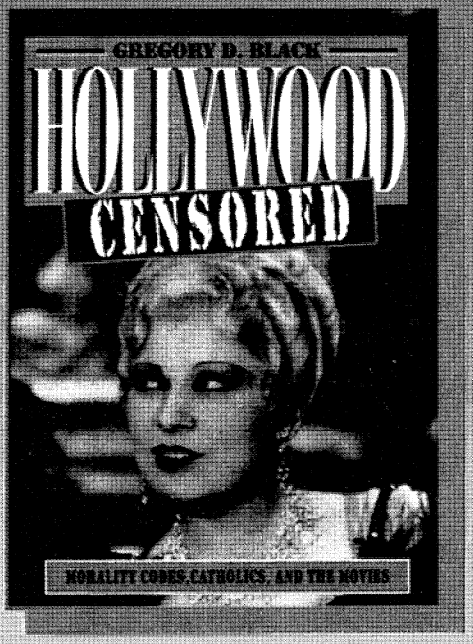

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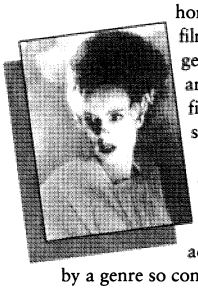

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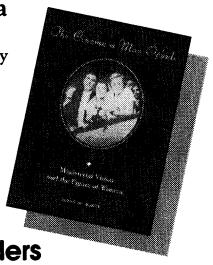

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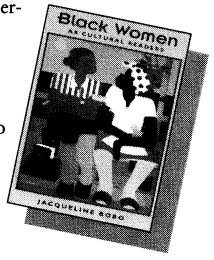

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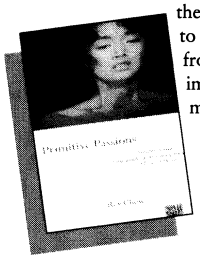

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